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BLACK MASK

SLAYER AT SEA
by FRED LANE



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BLACK MASK

A Magazine of Gripping, Smashing Detective Stories

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YOUR NEXT ISSUE OF



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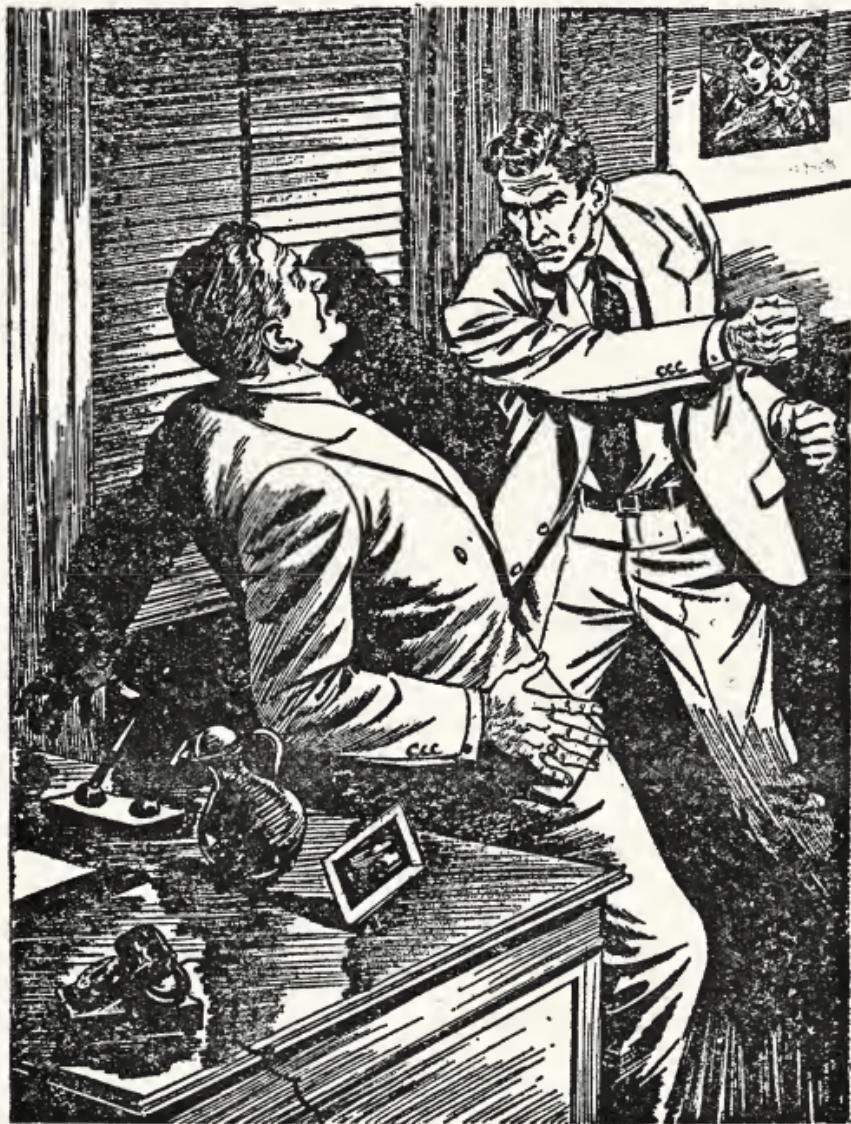
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**Though I damned myself to a fugitive's lonely hell,
I'd never regret loving luscious Anita—nor
the bullet that made her a widow.**

I landed one on Blue Belmont's chin.



SLAYER AT SEA

Suspense-Packed Novel of a Right Guy Gone Wrong



By FRED LANE



CHAPTER ONE.

THE ANGEL AND THE SAILOR.

THERE was a throbbing pain in my head. I was aware of that, first of all. Then I heard the soft, surfy sound of water. I breathed deeply and recognized familiar odors—the unmistakable salty-oily atmosphere. I stirred, knowing that I wasn't aboard ship in the second mate's cabin where I should have been. Something sharp and hard was digging into my spine. Chilly water lapped at my feet. I forced my eyes open and blinked into the damp darkness.

Memories began pinwheeling dizzily as they surged into my brain. After seemingly interminable moments, the whirling slowed like a motion picture projector losing speed and finally it stopped at an off-focus montage. It was framed with sound.

I remembered a gunshot and a woman's scream.

Vainly, I tried to thrust the picture out of my mind, but it was there as if acid-etched: A gaunt figure sprawled out, ominously inert. Poised in a wide archway, a dark, smooth-skinned man wearing a thin, crooked smile that looked like a crack in glass. Near him, a girl in green with upswept, butter-colored hair. Her hand was pressed against her throat.

There was more. There was a large masculine hand holding a revolver. The hand was part of a seated figure which I stared at in the mirrored wall—a familiar figure. It

was I—Alan Corson, second mate of the freighter, *Southern Cross*. I was holding that weapon.

Nightmare? No, from the very beginning, I knew the picture was a real memory. And then I realized where I was. I was under a wharf.

My arms trembled as I tried to raise myself from the slimy rocks where I'd been lying. I'd fallen there when, in the course of my crazy flight, alarm added to intoxication caused me to lose my balance and fall headlong.

A rock crab scratched across my hand. My knees jabbed into something razor-edged. A broken bottle. The smell of decaying barnacles, creosoted pilings, and oily water was sickening.

I sank down again and, for a moment, found a respite from my thoughts in sharp sickness. But only for a moment. The picture started burning before my eyes again. Then, over the ringing in my ears, I could hear Anita Belmont's voice. She wasn't in the tableau the mirror revealed. But she was somewhere in that room and she was saying:

"Get out, you two."

And the man with the crooked smile and the butter blonde disappeared.

"Alan, darling." Anita whispered the words. "Alan, what are we going to do! If the police find you here—"

And my own voice, thick and blurred: "They won't. I'll get away. I can cut down to the Embarcadero from here, easy. I'll ditch the gun in the bay. . . ."

So I raced from that miniature mansion on Telegraph Hill in a flood-tide frenzy. I stumbled down the back stairs into a dimly lit lane, and hurtled over the embankment. I was going to get rid of the gun!

Mirthless laughter choked me. Like an unheralded white squall, the enormity of the thing gripped me. Terror became crested with anger—anger at my consummate stupidity for having got myself into such a mess and thinking that getting rid of the gun would accomplish anything.

I wanted to shout every sailor's curse that I knew, as if that might dispel my hopeless, trapped terror. But I clenched my teeth and my fists instead. Then I inhaled great lungfuls of that pungent air and let it go in sobbing groans. I was as close to crying as I ever would be. But I wasn't regretting Blue Belmont's death. I was regretting only that I had been the damned fool who had killed him. . . .

The sea-minutes stretch into hours, days into months, when you're on a tramp like the *Southern Cross*. It's always that way on a deepwater cargo carrier; life assumes a gray, deadly monotony that is endurable only because you know it will end in a glorious fling when you reach port. Your body is tingling with the energy the sun has poured into you, and the clean washed air from off the sea has given you a surging vitality which demands that you cease this fast from living. You count the days until your return from a long haul out of the Philippines to the States.

And you count the seconds—when there is a girl like Anita Belmont waiting for you in San Francisco; a girl you're going to marry when—and if—her husband consents to a divorce.

When the *Southern Cross* cleared quarantine and tied up, I lost no time. I telephoned Anita from the dock. As I stood there in the booth, tensely expectant, I thought: *This is the third time I've called from here after a trip. Maybe three's a charm, after all.* It might be that, this time, she'd say she had persuaded Blue to grant her her freedom.

I said: "Hello, Anita."

Her voice, so very soft, yet so clear, came over the wire: "I've been waiting, darling."

I could see her, then, in all her imperious loveliness. Her hair—a shining darkness, as black as a fallen angel's wing; her pale, oval face animated by her smoldering sea-green eyes and a rare full-lipped smile. And she held her exquisite head high, proud of her slim tallness.

I did not ask about Blue Belmont. I knew that if there were any good news, she would have told me immediately. "When can I see you?" I asked.

"We could arrange to come down to your ship, this afternoon."

"Who is 'we'?"

"Another couple and I," she said, and I heard her sigh.

The skipper didn't approve of parties aboard. I was going to tell her that, but she went on talking. She'd never seen the *Southern Cross*. "We could be there at four," she said. "And later—"

So, I managed the passes and then started pacing. Four o'clock was more than an hour away.

I was glad when Shan Malone, the *Record's* waterfront reporter, lumbered aboard. "Hi, Dog," he shouted and pounded me lustily.

I pounded back. He was about the only friend I had in Frisco since, the first time I made the port, I'd met Anita—and there didn't seem much point in knowing anyone else these past six months. But it wasn't only because I liked Shan that I welcomed him. He was someone to talk to, someone who might make the hour seem like something less than an eternity.

"You're looking fit," he said with a touch of envy, and I watched him throw back his wide shoulders and draw in a deep breath—and his stomach. Six feet three inches can carry a lot of weight, but not quite two hundred and thirty odd pounds.

I felt more than fit. I grinned at Malone and knew that even if he topped me by a couple of inches and outweighed me by some fifty pounds, I could take him on for either exercise or real business.

He walked with me to my cabin where I broke out some scotch and filled the glasses. He was, as usual, looking for some human interest incident, he said.

"Not a thing this time," I told him. "*Southern Cross* arrives from Zamboanga. Mixed cargo. Nothing happened."

"Dog," Shan said, "you sailors have a great racket. See the world and get paid for it. Tear the town apart when you hit port. Sail off and forget it. What a life!"

"What a life," I echoed, and there was a bitterness in my voice which Shan did not miss. The wide grin on his freckled face went all over to one side and stayed there at about a forty-five degree angle.

"Not forgetting you're a seadog, are you?"

"What do you mean, Shan?"

"A girl in every port. Love 'em and leave 'em. Don't take 'em seriously." He leaned toward me and I thought he was going to say something more. Instead, he reached for the bottle.

I took another drink and looked at my watch. Shan raised his bushy red eyebrows. "Expecting someone? Want me to blow?"

I shrugged. "Stick around if you want. The more the merrier."

"Still La Belmont, eh? And in convoy, as usual? Playing it safe." He ran his large freckled hand through his red hair and said with elaborate casualness: "Her husband's a friend of mine. Of course, I use the word 'friend' with reservations. Blue's a cool cookie."

"I don't like him either."

"Who does? But still, people go to his clip-joint to lose their dough regularly. Could be mass masochism, of course."

"I wouldn't know. I've never been in The Blue Club."

"Then stay away from there. Blue's been mighty edgy, lately. Could be that some out-of-town boys are trying to move in on a good thing or—" He broke off, twisting about uncomfortable in his chair. He was silent for a bit, then: "Blue's wife isn't going to give up her golden cage for a sailor, even if he is a snorting young stallion—"

I was on my feet.

So was Shan. "Take it easy," he said. He had a funny look in his blue eyes when he said, very softly: "So it's love. I was afraid of that. Knight errant, hot to slay a dragon and rescue a princess." He shook his head. "Well, so long, Dog. I've got a deadline to meet."

He closed the door behind him very quietly and I went back to the table, reached for my glass and drained it. I didn't like what Malone had said. I liked, even less, the things he had left unsaid. But my anger toward him centered on Blue Belmont. He was responsible for what the Malones of the world thought about Anita and me.

I'd met Blue Belmont only once. He had walked over to the table at the Mark, pulled up a chair alongside Anita, and silently joined the party. I looked at him curiously, this gray-haired, gray-faced man with steel-gray eyes. He met my glance coldly and then said to Anita with a twisted smile: "Have yourself a good time, kid."

I saw her draw away from him and I heard his muted, unpleasant chuckle. As he left us, Anita said: "That's my husband."

At that time, I wasn't in love. I was simply overwhelmed and dazzled. More than anything, I was aware of the envious looks in other men's eyes when Anita was with me. I told myself that I was sensible; that this dark, regal beauty was beyond my reach; she was someone to be worshipped from afar.

As I was recalling the moment when I had ceased to be sensible—and she had ceased to seem unattainable—the quartermaster rapped on my door.

"People to see you, sir. At the gangway."

I wanted to run but I forced myself to walk. When I saw her, standing on deck, I tried to will my heart to stop its schoolboy thumpings. At first, I saw only her. She was smiling—that slow, rare smile. It took actual physical effort to turn my head toward the couple nearby. I glanced at them with

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politely proper interest as Anita introduced me to the girl. Fran Hillis, her name was. Just another blonde, I thought. The man—

Anita was saying: "You remember Parks Montrose, of course."

I remembered. He was one of the ubiquitous throng that nearly always surrounded Anita. He was a shade too sleek for my liking, with clothes too well-tailored and hands too well-manicured. He stood there with his overcoat draped over one arm, assuming a nonchalant stance as he regarded me briefly. His big brown eyes would have done things for a woman but not for a man. They pointed up a kind of softness which was repulsive—to me, at least.

After we had a drink in my cabin, I took them around the ship. When I finally maneuvered Anita away from Montrose and the blonde, I asked: "When can we be alone?"

She didn't have a chance to answer. The chief engineer joined us and then, the skipper. The old man mellowed surprisingly when he saw Anita and he broke out a bottle. After a while, the blonde joined us and then, somewhat later, Montrose.

By the time we went ashore for dinner, I was feeling high. Anita's blue convertible was parked near the wharf. Montrose and the blonde headed for it.

"Must they tag along?" I asked suddenly irritable. Montrose's manner and smile had begun to get under my skin more than usual. His manner toward me had always been condescending, but it was his smile that annoyed me most. It was thin and crooked, a studied effort which the rest of his face failed to back up. "I don't like Montrose," I muttered.

"But we can trust him," Anita said softly. "He'll see that we'll have a chance to be alone for a little while."

"When?" I asked impatiently.

"Later." Her eyes made it a promise.

"We can't go on like this," I said morosely. "I'm going to have it out with Blue."

I heard her sigh. "He'd kill me before he'd let me go, Alan. You know that. And if he ever guessed that you—" Her fingers tightened on my arm. "We must be careful, darling. Everybody knows that Blue has ways and means of settling accounts without stirring out of the club."

We'd reached her car, then, and she spoke briefly to Parks Montrose and the girl as she slipped into the driver's seat.

She stepped on the starter and said: "There's a flask in the dashboard compartment if anyone needs a drink."

Nobody needed one except me. I opened the compartment and said: "Something new had been added." I picked up a .25.

"I bought it last week—just in case of an emergency," Anita said as she turned into Howard Street.

There was a silence then. I was wondering if she were even more afraid of Blue than she admitted, when Parks Montrose finally said: "Know how to use it?"

"I assume you just point it and pull the trigger," Anita replied.

Fran Hillis said: "There's a little more to it than that." I noted the drawl in her voice. Not the you-all business, but just enough vowel-stretching to make it nice. I turned and looked at her and she smiled. She was, I thought, a very pretty girl, and I wondered, idly, why she was mixing up with a pretty-boy character like Montrose. He spoke then:

"You ought to get the feel of the thing, Anita. It's still light. Why not drive down the coast road and do a little practicing in one of those arroyos?"

I protested. I said I was hungry. But I was really impatient. I wanted to get through with all the fancy buildup—a foursome out for a gay evening.

Anita's lovely head came closer to mine and she said softly: "There's very little traffic on the coast, Alan. If we're being followed, we can soon tell."

Fran Hillis' voice came from the back. "If we're going down the coast, you should turn at the next block, Anita."

"Okay, turn," I said.

So we drove down the coast road and I kept drinking. The summer sun, which had been shining on the Embarcadero and in midtown, was now hidden by a cold fog that was sweeping in from the ocean and, instead of veiling the bleak cliffs, accentuated their unlovely nakedness. The elated anticipation was all drained out of me. I felt chilled and depressed when Anita finally slowed by a garbage-strewn gully, backed, and then headed the convertible north. She switched off the motor and said: "I'm ready for a lesson. Since you're an expert—" She glanced at me gravely.

"Who gave you that idea?" I asked.

"You," she replied. "You told me how you shot sharks."

I was silent, I watched a car go by. It was driven by an elderly woman. I said to Anita, very softly: "I'm sitting here in the car. I want to size up what goes by."

The three of them got out and shot at an improvised target. Anita couldn't hit it at ten paces. Parks Montrose wasn't much better. Fran Hillis never missed.

I watched them and I watched the cars go by, too. There weren't very many. A bus, a couple of trucks—and a sedan with two men in it. The sedan slowed—out of sheer curiosity, perhaps. But it might have slowed because the driver planned to turn around at the first opportunity and carry out Blue's orders to keep the convertible in sight.

Fran Hillis spoke to me: "How good a marksman are you, Mr. Corson?"

"Not as good as you are," I said, without looking at her. I was watching the road. "Like most ships' officers, I have a gun but no occasion to use it."

"Well," she said persuasively, "let's see what you can do."

"I shook my head. I wondered if the sedan would be starting back now that the shooting had ceased. The blonde thrust the gun toward me. I simply opened the dashboard compartment with my left hand and pointed with the other. "Put it away."

"It ought to be cleaned." But she put the .25 in its place.

My glance veered to Anita and then back to a car which had rounded the curve and was roaring northward. It wasn't a sedan.

"Are you afraid of guns?" Parks Montrose asked pleasantly.

"Just not interested," I replied.

"I'd like to see how good you are—with a gun," Anita said, taking my hand and urging me from the car. "Come on, Alan—just for fun."

"It's getting dark. Let's shove off."

"But Alan—" she protested with a trace of a frown.

I couldn't take a frown and she knew it. If shooting off a toy gun would make her smile, I'd do it. I was about to reach for the gun when Montrose spoke:

"Afraid it might bite you, Corson?"

I forgot Anita's frown. I could only think of a chilly grimace and the obvious taunt. I said, not very brightly but very angrily: "You go to hell, Montrose." I opened the compartment, took out the flask, and finished it.

For a long moment, no one spoke. Then Fran Hillis said we'd better head back to town.

Anita drove with her usual assurance and speed for nearly a mile before the silence was broken. At intervals, I looked back into the thickening dusk but there were no pursuing headlights.

Fran Hillis' soft laughter rang out. "I've been looking, too, Mr. Corson. Not a traffic cop in sight."

"Nothing in sight," I said, touching Anita's arm. I lowered my voice and went on: "If we were being tailed, you must have lost them in the downtown traffic. Let's drive Montrose and the girl to wherever they want to go, and have dinner alone."

She lifted one hand from the wheel and pressed my fingers. I drew closer to her as she whispered: "We still have to be careful, darling. That girl—she's working for Blue."

I cursed under my breath. "How long must we wait, then?"

"Not too long, darling. The little fool is mad about Parks. Right after dinner, they'll go their own way. It has to be like that. So—so that she can't tell Blue that we ran out on them."

"Why did Montrose ring her in?" I asked exasperatedly.

"It was Blue's idea. Parks had another date but Blue asked me to see that Fran had a good time tonight. He can read, darling. He knew that the *Southern Cross* was due today."

CHAPTER TWO.

FOUR'S A CROWD.

I STARTED to speak again, but Montrose started talking about some new restaurant that had just opened. Fran Hillis said that since we were so near, the Beach Tavern was indicated. Because Montrose didn't seem to like the suggestion, I enthusiastically seconded the blond's idea. As a clincher, I added: "Besides, why wait another half hour for a drink?"

I didn't need anything more to drink but I wanted more, anyway. I had three highballs at the Beach Tavern while the others were still working on their first martinis. Things began getting fuzzy about that time. I vaguely recall ordering a steak and

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a bottle of wine. I know I drank the wine but I don't remember eating. There was music and there was dancing. I must have danced because I remember Fran Hillis looking up into my face, saying: "You're the first really tall man I ever enjoyed dancing with." I was navigating automatically, I guess.

Then there came a moment when I realized that Anita and I were alone at the table. I picked up the brandy and benedictine in front of me and gulped it down. "At last," I said. "They did a nice fade-out, didn't they?"

Anita pushed her liqueur in front of me and shook her head. "They're dancing," she said. "Over there."

I looked but saw only blurred figures. By closing one eye, I managed to see Montrose's off-center smile rising above a butter-yellow head.

"Damn Montrose, anyway," I muttered and tossed off the liqueur Anita had pushed my way. I caught her hand and, as bad as my vision was, I could see misery in her lovely face. Her eyes were averted from me and her lips had become a tight line when she said:

"Do you think you might be able to make Blue listen to reason?"

"I could try," I said.

It wasn't long after that we left the Beach Tavern. Hazily, I remember how difficult it was, by then, to steer a straight course through the maze of tables and reach the car. But the ride down town sobered me, some. Before we reached Van Ness Avenue, I was compelling my brain to fashion sentences that might make sense to Blue Belmont and trying not to listen to Parks Montrose's occasional gratuitous advice. More than once he said: "I don't think you'd better see Blue, Anita. You're drunk."

At a traffic light she stopped and, turning back to Montrose, said: "I'm just a little drunk—but awfully desperate. Maybe you and Fran had better stay out of the club."

"I'll go with you," Montrose said. "No telling what Blue might do."

Anita spoke to me quietly: He won't dare do anything. There'll be too many people in the place. But Alan—if he won't listen, it's going to be good-by. I'll never dare see you again."

I heard Fran Hillis trying to make conversation with Montrose. She sounded em-

barrassed, as though she didn't know what the set-up was, but could make a good guess—and didn't want to.

But Montrose wasn't willing to let the matter drop. As Fran's voice trailed off uncertainly, he said: "This is liable to be a nasty piece of business, Fran. You stay out of it. I would, if I didn't think there'd be trouble and that I'd be needed."

If there was going to be any trouble, I reflected, Montrose would arrange to be a long ways off. I'd seen his kind ashore before. Tailors' dummies don't have guts.

Anita found a parking place almost opposite The Blue Club. A blue neon outlined the name and a cocktail glass. It looked like one of those spots they call "intime." Just a place to have quiet drinks in quiet company. That was the front. But if you knew your way around, you could get past Skid Malloy and find yourself at the dice tables and roulette wheels in the back. And Blue Belmont, himself, would issue you a membership card. This little gesture, I understood, made things more or less legal. What other means Belmont used to keep his doors open evoked inspired gossip.

For fifteen years, Blue Belmont had been operating at the same location—and cleaning up. Rumor had it that he was worth a million or more. His club had financed hotels and apartment houses; they were earning additional fortunes which, in turn, were being invested in other enterprises. But not even his racing stables lured him very far, for very long, from the Blue Club. It was more than his living. It was his life.

The four of us stood at the bar as Anita asked Skid Malloy if Blue were in. The fellow had the look of a wild pig, big and husky, without an ounce of the honest lard that pigs should have. His mean little red-rimmed eyes peered at us over a porcine snout. When he spoke, he barely moved his lips: "Not in, now. Maybe not till eleven."

Parks Montrose ordered drinks. I was Malloy's best customer. Pretty soon, the edges of everything started getting fuzzy again. By the time I reached the back room, I had to use my one-eye technique to read the dice. I bought fifty dollars worth of chips and handed half of them to Fran Hillis. "Try your luck," I said.

Three men and a woman were playing. A houseman banked the field point after

pass and other board bets. We broke even until the dice came around to me.

Then I started plunging. I couldn't seem to roll anything higher than a three. In ten minutes, I was out five hundred dollars. I was drunk, but not that drunk. I started to say something to that effect.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. Blue Belmont jerked his head toward the far corner of the room.

"My office," he said, "is over there. You'd—" He broke off when a small, plump woman walked toward him. He smiled. For a second, Belmont looked like a human being. She murmured something and he nodded. "I'll be with you in just a few minutes, Edith. This won't take long." Then, the smile gone from his face, he headed for his office.

Anita was there, standing by the filing cases in the rear of the room. She flushed me an uneasy glance.

"My wife," Blue Belmont began, "tells me that you want to discuss a personal matter with me." As he spoke, he seated himself on the edge of his desk, crushed out a cigarette, and then glanced up at me.

The fluorescent light made his hair and face even grayer than I remembered. I watched his bloodless lips twist sardonically as he said: "However, I don't care to discuss anything with a drunken fool like you. I simply want to tell you that if you ever show up here again, I'll have you booted out." Quickly, he turned toward Anita: "And, as for you—you know how I feel about women who are good-for-nothing tramps. If you think you're going to get—"

She had walked toward him with a fierce imperiousness and, before he could say another word, she struck him a resounding blow across his mouth. Unhurriedly, he stood up and pressed the buzzer on his desk. Then, with a lightning gesture, he let fly a right to her jaw. With a gasping sob, she staggered back a few steps.

I rushed him. I landed one on his chin and followed up with a blow to his middle that sent him crashing against his desk. He had more coming to him, but Skid Malloy was on the job. He caught me from behind and pinned my arms to my sides.

Malloy hadn't paused to close the office door when he came in answer to the buzzed summons. The crowd outside began pushing into the office. The small, plump woman who'd spoken to Belmont a few moments

before forced her way through to where Belmont was struggling to his feet. He smiled at her reassuringly and pulled himself upright. He looked at us but spoke to Malloy: "Skid," he said, "show Mrs. Belmont and her friend the way out."

Her hand pressing against her jaw, Anita joined me. And then there was Fran Hillis, her eyes narrowed thoughtfully, and Parks Montrose—still wearing his infernal grin.

"Let go of my arms," I snarled at Malloy.

"Outside," he snarled back. "Want I should wipe the floor up with you on the way out?"

I heaved and pulled away. The look of amazement on his ugly face made me laugh. I laughed louder when, a second later, I wiped off all expression with a hard left.

I felt Anita tugging at my arm. "Alan," she whispered, "please—please come!" I couldn't understand the urgency in her voice, but I understood that she was commanding and I was willing to obey. I stepped over Malloy's prostrate body, followed her past the bar into the street, and across to the convertible.

Over my shoulder, I saw Montrose. He was at our heels, half-dragging his blonde. He pushed her into the car and muttered: "Get going, Anita!"

"What's the rush?" I asked belligerently.

With a grinding of gears, Anita jerked the car into motion. She said, a bit breathlessly: "They wouldn't want anything to happen in the club—but some of Blue's friends wouldn't hesitate to work for you over out in the street."

"And now where?" I murmured as Anita recklessly drove through the after-the-theatre traffic.

"Home," she said dully. "My jaw is aching. Maybe some ice—"

"What about them?"

"You'll all leave—at midnight," she whispered. "But you'll come back and we'll have a few moments together for the last time. Blue won't be in till daylight. He never is. But darling—this will be the last time. You can see now that it has to end."

"It isn't going to end. If there's no other way out of it, I'll kill Blue Belmont." I wasn't whispering.

I heard the girl in back gasp.

Blue Belmont's home on Telegraph Hill was perched on a cliff overlooking the bay. It wasn't so large, but it was exquisite. When I walked into the big oval drawing room with its eggshell-white satin furniture, its

mirrored walls, and crystal tables, I thought about golden cages and I said, uneasily: "I couldn't give you anything like this, Anita."

Montrose laughed. "Suppose you saw to it she was a rich widow, Corson?"

I was fed up with him. And I'd had a taste of blood a while before. I was going to let him have one, right on his crooked mouth. He knew he'd gone too far, this time. Shamelessly, he spun around and put himself behind Anita.

"You shouldn't say such rotten things, Parks." Anita, her hand still pressing on her jaw, walked away from him, her anger plainly apparent.

Fran Hillis looked uncomfortable. It seemed to me like it was just the right moment to break the party up, so I said: "Let's call it a night."

"After we've had a nightcap or two," Montrose said, following in Anita's wake. When he was a safe distance away from me, he walked across the room to the cellar.

I saw Anita pass through a wide arch into the library and I hurried after her. We sat down in a foamy soft love-seat opposite a six-foot span of mirrored wall which was flanked by half-filled bookcases. Montrose and Fran Hillis joined us there with bottles, charged water, and ice. I had three or four quick ones while Montrose took maddeningly tiny sips.

Suddenly, the fuzziness started again. This time it didn't go away. It kept getting worse. It wasn't only that I couldn't see things clearly; I couldn't seem to hear whole sentences. Just words and, occasionally, phrases.

"Some strong black coffee—" That was Fran Hillis' voice.

"We can't leave Anita alone with him." That was Montrose.

And that is all I remember until I heard a shot and a scream and then stared into the mirrored wall. I shall never forget what I saw: The crooked smile, the butter-blonde, Blue Belmont lying ominously still—and the gun in my left hand. . . .

* * * * *

Over the lap of the water, I heard a truck rumble along the waterfront, a lone seagull screech, and footsteps reverberating on the planking above me. The night watchman, probably.

I put my head down, rested it on my right arm and became aware of a steady tick-tick. My wrist watch had somehow survived. I glanced at the luminous dial. Three a.m.

And we'd reached Anita Belmont's home before midnight. How long had I been blacked out in the library? How long had I been unconscious under the wharf? I didn't know; couldn't hazard a guess. What difference did it make? Three hours had written a death sentence for me. Unless—

Unless I could make a get-away. It can be done. I know that because I've been in foreign ports and, every now and then, you see someone who, rumor has it, escaped the noose, the chair, or the gas-chamber. Discount rumor ninety per cent, and you still know someone's done it and it will be done again—and why not by you?

I'd been a fool—but I wasn't going to pay for my folly with my life. Not if I could help it. But the law was going to demand my life. I wasn't so much of a fool as not to know that I'd attacked Belmont in his club in front of witnesses; I'd threatened to kill him in front of witnesses; and I'd apparently killed him in front of witnesses. At the very least, I'd been seen with that gun in my hand.

That was the clincher—if the law needed one. Automatically, I touched my coat pocket. It wasn't there. It wasn't in any of my pockets. It was gone.

I tried to think straight. I was sure I had put it in my pocket. I might have lost it, though, when I lunged down the steep slope of Telegraph Hill, but I couldn't recall having fallen. But then, when I'd come onto the waterfront and had been momentarily silhouetted in the glare of oncoming headlights, I'd panicked and leaped to the rocks under the wharf. I'd fallen, then, all right.

So I fumbled frantically about the slimy pilings, searching for the gun. I cut my fingers on broken glass and tin cans. Whether five minutes or more elapsed, I don't know. But glimmerings of sense began to flicker through my mind. The gun wasn't important now. The only thing that mattered was getting away.

And I realized I wouldn't get far in my torn, stained clothes—or with the few pieces of change I had left after my session with the dice in The Blue Club. The way I looked, the first cop who saw me would jerk me in as a suspicious character. Risky as it was, I had to get back to the *Southern Cross*, change my clothes, and then promote a loan. With a few hundred dollars to hand Cap Glinka of the *Calypso*—

Quickly, but cautiously, I crawled out along the rocks, trying to find out what

wharf I was under. A few dock lights burned dimly to the north. There was a dark hull of a vessel at her berth. I studied her outlines, trying to identify her. Then, as the lights of an automobile played on her briefly, I observed the stack aft. She was a lumber schooner, a Fell & Johnson ship. That would be Pier 39. The *Southern Cross* was tied up at 35.

I decided to swim. In my disheveled condition, the open Embarcadero couldn't be chanced. I wasn't quite sure just how I'd get aboard my ship, obtain clothing, and then get ashore again. But it was the only course I could shape.

I peeled off my coat and shoes and slipped into the water. I gasped when I hit. It was cold, but it would put the finishing touches on the sobering-up process. Sea life had fined me down to physical fitness and I knew that my brain would start functioning again in just a little while. But there wasn't much time, now. I had to get all my wits working if I were going to make a successful getaway.

As I swam, I saw lights twinkling from the city's hills. Headlights winked along the waterfront. Happy, fortunate people in their homes or in their cars, I thought. Lucky, law-abiding people.

The stevies were discharging cargo from number one hold under floodlights as I worked close to the *Southern Cross*. I cut deep into the shadows and swam around the bow. Winches were rattling; the stevedores were shouting. I paddled along the starboard side of the hull hoping for a stray line to get hold of. There was nothing; only slippery steel plates. It was the same at the stern. I treaded water and my body began aching with the chill and my teeth started chattering. I stared around, concentrating on some way of getting aboard the *Southern Cross* unseen. Or getting aboard at all, for that matter.

A dark hulk, deep in the water, loomed up. It was tied to the wharf, closer in than the freighter. I swam toward it. It was an oil barge and her deck was only a few feet above me. I reached for a grip, pulled myself up, and peered around.

Nobody was in sight. I clambered aboard, ran aft and up the gangway to the dock. Hugging the shadows, I crept quietly through piles of crated merchandise. I breathed with relief when I saw the *Southern Cross*. She was still low. It was a jump of only about five feet from the wharf to her deck.

A man sauntered along the dock. After he had passed, I jumped for the ship's rail, climbed aboard, and paused behind a ventilator. So far, so good. I'd made it without being seen. The midship housing was clear. I hurried forward to my cabin.

I didn't have to switch on my light. The glow from the wharf filtered through my porthole so that I could see what I was about. Wetting a towel in the basin, I swabbed the dirt and oil from my body, dried myself and dressed. I was just putting on a gray tweed suit when I heard voices on deck, outside my port. I heard someone mention my name. It was Erickson, the mate.

"Al Corson," he was saying, "is probably halfway to Mexico by now. Those cops at the gangway are going to have a hell of a long wait."

The skipper said gruffly: "Better go grab yourself some sleep, mister. There's not any telling when they'll be around again with a new set of questions for us to answer." He took a deep breath and then let go a string of salty oaths. "Women—" he spat out. "They been getting sailors into trouble ever since Adam was an oakum boy." His voice faded as they clumped forward.

I had to get off the *Southern Cross*, fast. It wouldn't be very long before dawn. I hastily packed a bag and then thought of my .38. I might need it—if only to pawn.

The gun was gone. Well, the police had been aboard. They'd have taken the gun, of course.

Quietly, I slipped out. On deck, I slunk into the shadows between two lifeboats and glanced at the dock. Somebody was standing at the gangway talking to the quartermaster. As he came aboard, I moved aft, climbed to the rail, balanced myself, and then leaped down to the dock.

It is no easy matter to get on or off a wharf unseen by the watchmen who guard the entrance. It's even tougher when there is a police car with two officers standing by, waiting to question everyone who passes. My only advantage lay in that they would be expecting me to be coming into the wharf, not leaving it.

But I didn't think I was going to make it, after all. I stood there behind stacks of cased goods for what seemed like hours before I saw what I had been praying for—a topped truck. Canvas tarps covered the load on the rear. As it thundered past, I caught the cargo lashings on the back. It wasn't easy, carrying my bag, but somehow I

managed to conceal myself under the tarps.

The truck stopped at the entrance while the watchman removed the chain to let it through. My luck held. They didn't search under the tarps. My driver and the watchman shouted something at each other and then the truck rolled on out at high speed. When he neared the Ferry Building, he had to slow to let a street car pass. I dropped off.

I wasn't halfway to Mexico—but I was on my way. All I needed were a few hundred dollars and Cap Glinka would sign me on his tub. I'd become—well, Pedro Gonzales A.B., perhaps, and I'd be left behind at some coffee port. It was just a matter of getting the money within two days—before Glinka's *Calypso* sailed south.

There was hardly a pedestrian in sight on Market Street and I felt damnably conspicuous walking along with my bag in the cold gray beginning of dawn. I ducked into an all-night restaurant, and after consulting the telephone directory, sat there drinking coffee and listening to a tinny radio until nearly six. By that time, I thought the counterman was eyeing me strangely.

There was nothing in the newspapers which were strewn along the counter—nothing about Blue Belmont's murder. But at six, the morning papers would be on the street. I stood up and, as I started out, I was aware that the radio was no longer spouting music. It was pouring out news.

I stood there, fascinated. Blue Belmont was dead, all right. And the police were seeking one Alan Corson for questioning.

I wanted to run. It seemed that I could feel the counterman's eyes staring at my back. I gritted my teeth and forced myself to walk out of the place slowly. As I stepped through the door I turned my head slightly. The counterman wasn't reaching for the telephone; he was listlessly swatting at a fly.

CHAPTER THREE.

FEAR'S WHITE SPOTLIGHT.

I LOOKED up and down Market Street. The city was beginning to stir. And I thought of the address I had seen in the telephone directory. A cruising taxi slowed and I was tempted—but I waved him on. I did not dare risk having some cab driver remember

that he had picked up a fare near the Embarcadero, a fare who resembled a man wanted for questioning—and had driven him to 1096 Bush Street.

I had only a vague idea regarding the location of Shan Malone's apartment, but I wasn't going to ask anyone. I veered north-northwest off Market Street and kept going until I found Bush. I found something else—a newsstand just opening up. I bought a paper.

All along, I had known it wasn't a nightmare. The radio had confirmed reality. But, seeing that headline, *Police Seek Blue Belmont Killer*, sent a new kind of chill coursing down my spine.

For a couple of minutes, I stood there reading. "Club Owner Fatally Shot in Telegraph Hill Home," was the subhead. And there were pictures. I turned my eyes quickly from the one which showed Belmont lying on the library floor. I barely glanced at the blurred photograph of Montrose or the one of Fran Hillis whose face was averted from the camera. But I stared until my eyes ached at the portrait of Anita. It was a duplicate of the one she had given me months ago.

"Hot looking number, ain't she?"

I glanced away from the picture and met the leer in the newsdealer's eyes. "Don't blame her for gettin' fed up with an ol' goat like that Belmont. Sixty, he was, the papers say. But this sailor guy, now—" He shook his head. "He don't look like much to me."

I frowned at another face on the page. At first, I didn't realize it was I. A reproduction of my seaman's passport photo, it might have flattered a gorilla, but I doubt it. Anyone who saw that face glowering at him out of the newsprint would be convinced that Al Corson was potentially guilty of anything.

All the grimy details were there in the story. Skid Malloy told of my fist fight with Blue Belmont. "It was all on account of the Mrs." He further revealed that, contrary to custom, Blue Belmont had left the club much earlier than usual. "Somebody calls up Blue on his private phone, and right after that, he pulls out. No, he don't tell me where he's going."

Parks Montrose carried on from there: Mr. Belmont was on the floor. Miss Hillis came up behind me. She had been without speaking, going directly into the library. An instant later, I heard a shot. When I

ran into the library, Mr. Belmont was on the floor. Miss Hillis came up behind me. She had been in the kitchen making coffee. I saw that Corson had the gun in his hand and we thought we had better clear out. And so we did."

Blue Belmont's widow wasn't quoted. She had collapsed.

"They got a real good description of this guy what killed Belmont," the news-dealer said to me. "He's got dark, wavy hair and hazel eyes. Six foot one, a hunnert an' eighty pounds. Why, just about your build. Say, you got a scar on your forehead?"

"Sure, a couple of 'em," I said and made a noise I hoped would pass for a chuckle and then, automatically, I pulled my hat down lower.

A little fat man impatiently tapped the dealer's arm and demanded change. I walked away at what I hoped was an unhurried, casual pace, but before I had gone halfway up the block, I was beginning to surge along. When I finally reached 1096, I was panting. I looked about nervously, suddenly wondering if the skipper of Erickson might have revealed to the police that Shannon Malone was the nearest thing to a friend I had in San Francisco.

But I saw no squad cars, no characters in blue. I turned to the apartment house panel and jabbed at the buzzer alongside his name. It was a full minute before he buzzed back, unlocking the front door. His apartment was on the second floor. I didn't bother with the elevator but ran up the stairs.

His door was open and his broad, freckled face peered out at me dourly. He pulled his bathrobe closer about his big body and jerked his head. "Come on in," he said. "I had a hunch it would you—chump."

I walked in past him. "You know, already?"

"I have a radio—and insomnia," he muttered. "Well, have a drink before I phone the cops." He poured bourbon into a water glass.

"Thanks for the drink, Shan. But—you're not calling the cops."

"Why not?"

"Well, you may be bigger than I am but I lead a clean life—most of the time."

"Okay, then. I don't want the joint messed up. Have a seat, Dog." He poured

himself a drink and stretched out on his rumpled bed. "But listen, Dog, they'll get you eventually. Not that folks don't get by with a murder, sometimes, but when you knock off a well-known gambling gent like Belmont and toss in a juicy scandal to boot, you're hawg-meat to a hillbilly. Might just as well let me be the one to turn you in."

"They're not going to get me, Shan. I'm clearing out of the country. All I need is some cash."

"As I live and breathe," Shan muttered. "Did you expect to put the bee on me for some going-away dough? In the first place, I don't know that we're exactly a Damon and Pythias set-up, and in the second place, where in hell would a newspaperman get that kind of moola!"

"I want you to get seven or eight hundred—or if you can, a grand—from Anita. I'll pay her back, one of these days."

"You certainly should, chump."

"Shut up," I said. "You can see Anita without anyone suspecting anything. She'll be glad to—"

"She ought to be. Thanks to you, she's a very wealthy widow instead of a misunderstood wife on an allowance."

"Well, will you do it for me, Shan?" I asked.

"No."

"Thanks, pal." I think I went as pale as I felt. Somehow, up until then, I had counted on Shan. Somehow, I figured he'd see me through.

"Chin up, Dog," Shan said with a curious roughness. "Use the old bean. Just how far do you think you'd get with a thousand bucks?"

"Might get to Mexico on the *Calypso*," I said dully.

"Oh, Lord!" He slapped his forehead with the palm of his hand. "Have you been falling for Glinka's yarns?"

"What about those two cons that escaped from Alcatraz? They got aboard the *Calypso* in the fog and—"

"That's what he says. Maybe they did—and maybe they didn't. But granted you could make a deal with him and get away—he'll! What's it going to be like, playing hide and seek with the law the rest of your days."

"I want the rest of my days, Shan. I want more than just a couple of months sitting around, waiting for my turn in the gashouse."

BLACK MASK

Shan Malone held out a pack of cigarettes. I took one and lit up. So did he. He pulled on it for a moment, then holding it off to one side he stared at its glowing tip. Finally, he said: "Galahads are damned fools."

"I don't get it, Shan."

"You're taking the rap—for her. Aren't you? He shot the words at me.

I shook my head. "The gun was in my hand, Shan. Montrose and the Hillis girl saw it."

"A frame?"

"No."

"Murder, pure and simple, eh?"

"Just simple, Shan. You know, I've read about this before in the newspapers. It always sounded fishy to me—this business about how, just before the gun went off, everything went black. Well, that's how it was, more or less."

"One hell of a defense, I'd say."

"That's the way it was. I don't know how I came to shoot Belmont. But I did. I'll never forget that picture—when everything ceased to be black and I saw myself with the gun in my hand—and Belmont sprawled out in front of me."

Viciously, Shan crushed out his cigarette. "Just the same, Dog, you were framed, just as sure as the good Lord made little apples. Even if you did blast the guy—" He stood up and scowled down at me. "If you'd throttled him with your bare hands, that'd be in character."

"I haven't been in character for a long time. I don't chase married women, as a rule."

He walked over to the window and stared out absently, "Frankly, I'd just as soon sniff gas as to have to look forward to the kind of existence you'll have if you take it on the lam. But then, maybe I haven't as strong a yen for living as you have."

I shrugged. Then I stood up, saying: "Well, thanks for the drink, Shan. I'm on my way. Will it be too much to ask that you give me about fifteen minutes before you call the police?"

"Sit down!"

Startled by the tone of his voice, I stepped backward.

"Sit down," he repeated. When I obeyed, he went on: "The *Calypso* sails Thursday. You can hole up here until then."

"You'll see Anita right away?" I said breathlessly.

"I'll see her, all right. But five will get you ten she won't cough up a thin dime. Just the same, I'll raise some dough for you, some way. And I'll fix things up with Glinka. If I can't do business with him, I happen to know of another guy who's pulling out of here Friday. Ex-rum runner."

I went weak all over. I put my head down in my hands and tried to speak. But I couldn't.

"Take this."

I took the glass which Shan was shoving into my face. I felt him pull the newspaper out of my pocket and I heard it rustle as he opened it. As I lifted the glass to my lips, I glanced over at Shan. He'd dropped the front page on the floor and was reading an inner page where the account of the murder was continued.

I stared down at Anita's picture. The one she had given me bore the words: *To Alan, my love.* By now, the police would have it. And her letters, too. I cursed myself for not having looked for them when I was aboard the *Southern Cross* a few hours before. The police might have missed them during their first search of my cabin and I could have destroyed them. Things were going to be tough enough for her without—

"How come you ever got mixed up with this Belmont dame?" Shan threw the papers down and eyed me intently.

"It was just one of those things, I guess. The way sailors meet women. They don't have time to make friends or influence people, Shan, so they just take advantage of circumstances. Well, it happened about six months ago, the first time I ever hit Frisco. The mate relieved me for an hour and I went across the Embarcadero to Barney's for a sandwich and a beer. I was in working uniform. Some people came in and they certainly didn't look like they belonged there with all the sailors and stevies. It looked to me like they were slumming."

"And you moved in on them?"

"I did not. I simply gawped—at Anita Belmont. And who wouldn't? There were five or six people with her, but I really saw only her. After a while, someone in her crowd—an elderly yachtsman whom I've never seen since—came over and asked me to join them for a drink. Maybe he wanted to show off to his friends that he could hold his own talking ships and the sea with a real sailor."

"Was it Oliver Blake?"

"I don't remember his name. Wouldn't know him again if I saw him, Shan. I talked with him for a few minutes but I kept looking at Anita. She smiled. And that did it. Somehow, I got up the nerve to talk to her. I said I'd like to see her again. She told me they were going on to the St. Francis. I barged in there about ten."

"Did you tell her this was the first time you ever made Frisco?"

"Probably. But what difference would that make? What are you getting at?"

"I was just thinking what a spot a guy would be in if he were a sailor in a strange port where he didn't have any friends or relatives—and a bunch of phonies say that they saw him with a gun in his hand and a corpse on the floor."

"Shan," I said wearily, "you just can't make a frame out of it. Montrose and the blonde aren't just *saying* they saw me. I saw myself." I told him of the mirror.

"Where'd you get the rod?"

"I don't know, Shan. Might be, I took it away from Belmont." I tried to remember, tried to pull aside that black curtain which shrouded the events that led up to that unforgettable tableau. "Maybe we fought again and I grabbed the gun out of his hand."

"And maybe you could make it self-defense if Montrose weren't so damned positive you banged away at Belmont almost a split second after he walked into the library. It looks like you were there laying for him." He kicked at the newspaper absently. "The cops say there's no sign of a struggle. The corpse wasn't mussed up at all, if you don't count his brains being scrambled by a bullet. By the way, have you still got the gun?"

"I lost it—I don't know where." I closed my eyes and recalled telling Anita that I was going to ditch the gun in the bay. At that moment, it was in my hand. Then, suddenly, I blinked. Something nagged at the back of my mind.

"You look done in, Dog. Crawl into the kip and relax while I start a fund-raising campaign."

"I can't stay here, Shan. You're liable to have callers."

"Nobody—" He stopped and nodded. "Oh, I see what you mean. Erickson's liable to mention that we were kind of chummy." He frowned thoughtfully. "But

you can't walk the streets for the next two days."

"I thought you might have an inn with the proprietor of some waterfront hotel where I wouldn't have to register."

Shan reached over for his wallet, squinted into it, and grunted: "How much've you got, Dog?"

"Not quite two bucks."

Shan raised his eyebrows and I said: "I got cleaned at The Blue Club last night."

"As if you needed anything more in the way of motives," he growled, and laid two five dollar bills on the table next to me. "There's all my worldly wealth till pay day. Go on, take it, Dog. And now, listen. I got a very cute scheme that may keep you under cover for the next few hours—until I line up a spot for you. Right now, you're going to one of the biggest hotels in town and stay there until I telephone you. Then you're going to meet me at the Holy Cow. Know where that dump is?"

"Never heard of it."

"It's in an alley between Sutter and Post, near Montgomery."

"Better make me a chart, Shan." He did.

Ten minutes later, I was getting out of his jalopy and falling in behind four passengers who had alighted from the airline bus. I followed them into the swank lobby of the hotel. After they had registered, I said: "I should have wired for reservations, but it was all I could do to get on the plane at the last minute."

The clerk accepted my explanation unhesitatingly. He smiled and said: "Fortunately, things are easing up." He pushed the register toward me. "614."

I wrote what Shan had suggested: "James Hudson, Los Angeles."

I shaved, showered, and tried to rest. A half dozen times, I started to doze off but, each time a sound, real or imagined, caused me to sit upright in the bed. A siren—it might be an ambulance or a fire truck, but it could also be a squad car tearing through downtown traffic, heading for the hotel and Room 614. Footsteps in the corridor—and I'd tense. For tortured seconds, I'd hold myself rigid, waiting—waiting for a peremptory knocking on the door.

Why didn't Malone call? Why? Because he didn't intend to. He decided to turn me in, after all. Well, why shouldn't he? Why should he stick his neck out for me? What

if there was that intangible thing that had sparked into being when we first met? What had I done to further it? I hadn't been interested in friendships these last six months. Besides, he was a reporter, wasn't he? And I was a damn good story.

Two hours passed. I told myself that if Malone had informed the police, they'd have got me by now. Then it occurred to me that perhaps someone had seen us leave the apartment together and that Shan was, perhaps—even now—sweating under cross-questioning.

I got up and started pacing. I shouldn't have dragged Shan into the mess. What would they call him? Accessory after the fact? What would they do to him? Whatever it was it would be enough to finish him with the *Record*.

CHAPTER FOUR.

BUDDY—OR BETRAYER?

ANOTHER hour dragged by while I wandered around the edges of a dim gray hell of uncertainty. Then I called room-service, ordered ham and eggs and coffee and the afternoon papers. I unlocked the door, went into the bathroom and turned on the shower. I stayed there while the waiter set up the table.

When the door closed behind him, I re-entered the room and, with unsteady fingers, picked up the *Bulletin*.

And there, on the front page, was one of those pictures snapped by a camera-girl in a night spot. In it, I didn't look like I needed a number. I looked like—me.

My eyes lingered on Anita's face. In that picture, as in life, she was holding her head high, like a lovely queen. But now, they'd see that she'd bow her head. The public would see to that. I'd put her on that kind of spot.

And then, a crazy, exciting thought flashed through my mind. If I could make good my escape—she would join me. Why wouldn't she? And she wouldn't—she couldn't—live where she could not hold her head high. But, in some far-off place, where we could be together and no one would know. . . .

Suddenly, I was sure I was going to make it all the way. And it wasn't going to be the sort of grim existence Shan pre-

dicted, either. I knew my way around—around the world. In six months, I'd be able to send for her and—

My eyes were closed as I dreamed of starlit skies and warm phosphorescent seas, but when I opened them again, I saw that nightclub picture. I wondered if the clerk at the desk downstairs was glancing at the paper and remembering James Hudson of Los Angeles.

I had to get out of there, fast. I couldn't count on Shan. I'd have to find some place on my own. But where?

Still maybe Shan would call, after all. Maybe the police hadn't caught up with him. I forced myself to read the latest account of—the Belmont killing, the *Bulletin* called it.

There were many more words than had appeared earlier, but no additional facts about the murder itself. And there was no mention of Shan Malone. But there was a statement which filled me with apprehension: *Inspector Dickenson announced that Corson is expected to be in custody within the next 24 hours.*

Did that mean they had Malone and were expecting him to finally break under questioning and reveal my whereabouts? Or, was it just a stock remark used by the police?

Ham and eggs, toast and coffee. They were cold when I started trying to eat. I pushed the food away after a few bites and started pacing.

And then, the telephone rang. I had the receiver off the hook before it stopped ringing. "Is this Hudson?"

"Speaking." I got the two syllables out with an effort. I was choked up inside. It was Shan Malone, at long last.

"Glad to hear you were able to fly up, Hudson," he went on. "That conference is scheduled to take place in a half hour. Can you make it over here?"

"Can do." I couldn't say another word.

Shan hung up.

The agony of waiting was now surpassed by the agony of apprehension. It would be more than three hours before the summer sun would be setting. How far would I get in broad daylight? A glance at me—and a glance at the afternoon papers—and ten thousand amateur sleuths would shout for the nearest cop.

If only it were dark! But, perhaps, Shan thought if we waited until then, the police would be getting around to making a more

than routine check of the big hotels. By now, they'd probably combed the dumps which is where they'd have assumed I'd head for, what with having been cleaned at The Blue Club.

I opened the door of my room. The corridor was empty. I turned the key and, aware of my jerky steps, headed for the elevators.

I'd left my bag behind me. I had to walk out of there looking like I was going to return. I wasn't going near the desk.

The elevator operator hardly glanced at me. The middle-aged couple, standing to one side, were intent upon a discussion of where to go for dinner. My breathing was somewhat easier when we reached the main floor and I glimpsed the lobby.

It was the cocktail hour. Nobody seemed interested in anything, it appeared, except my or her companion and a drink. I adjusted my hat, pulling it down lower over my forehead and turned down the long hall which led to the side entrance.

I stepped into Post Street, holding my breath. Nobody looked my way. Everyone seemed in a hurry; office workers and tired women shoppers intent only on getting home to a pot roast. A cab pulled up to the curb and discharged a quartet of giggling occupants. I started toward the cab, but then swerved and joined the Post Street parade. I realized that a cab driver would have minutes to look at me instead of a passer-by's seconds.

That walk from Powell to Montgomery should have reassured me. But it didn't. By the time I reached Grant Avenue, I began saying to myself: "The law of averages is going to trip you up, Corson. One hundred people will not. But what about number one thousand and one? And I am about due to run into him any second."

So my nerves were pretty badly shot when I walked into the place called the Holy Cow. It was even more dimly lit than most drinking spots and I blinked, trying to accustom my eyes to the smoky duskiness. There were several people at the bar but I couldn't discern their features. But I could see an enormous broad back. It turned.

"Hi, there, Hudson." Shan Malone walked toward me. He grabbed my arm and steered me past the bar and the tables. "I explained to Mitch," he said softly, "that I wanted to interview a guy who could give me a hot story about a waterfront racket."

He fumbled with a key and I heard a click. We entered a cubby hole which did service as an office. It was lit by a single small-size electric light bulb which dangled at the end of a cord. But the illumination was dazzling after the cozy gloom.

There was a couch which took up all the wall space on one side of the room. Malone appropriated it, stretched out, and pointed to a battered safe. On it stood a bottle of scotch, a bottle of sparkling water, and a pail of ice cubes. "Pour me one quick," he muttered. "My feet are killing me. What a day!"

I did a sloppy job with the drinks. "I had a sort of bad day myself," I said.

"Hurry up," Shan said. "And then sit down. You're not going to be able to take it standing up."

I passed him a glass and sat down in the straight-backed chair in front of a small scarred desk. "Did you get the money, Shan?"

"I got five hundred. Maybe I'll get another hundred tomorrow. After that—well, I don't know where I'll get any more."

"Are they watching her very closely?"

"Not very. I got in to see her before noon to-day. I gave her a line, not knowing who might be listening. Told her a bunch of the boys from the *Southern Cross* were taking up a collection to get a mouthpiece for you and would she contribute. She wouldn't."

"Say that again."

"She wouldn't. Quote: Alan Corson has ruined my life. I never want to hear his name again, unquote."

I looked down into my glass. "I don't blame her," I said.

"Here's some more good news for you, Dog. They found the gun. In the rear, not ten feet from the house. They found it almost immediately after they got there, but kept mum about it until they checked the serial numbers. Know who it belongs to?"

"Was it Belmont's?"

"Nope. It was sold in L. A. to a guy named Alan J. Corson."

The liquor splashed over my hand and slopped onto the desk. "Damn it, Shand, it couldn't be! Unless—" and I told him about how I had been unable to find it when I sneaked aboard the *Southern Cross*—"unless the police took it from my cabin and planted it."

"They don't operate like that around here, Dog. You don't remember taking it with

you on that party—or giving it to Anita for a love token?"

"I didn't take the gun." I thought back quickly and went on: "But Montrose and the Hillis girl knew where my cabin was." I recalled how we'd wandered about the ship, sometimes as a foursome, sometimes as a twosome—the latter whenever I was able to arrange it. And I remembered that Fran had been alone when she came into the Chief's quarters and that Montrose had followed her some moments later. "Montrose!" I said suddenly.

"He has a beautiful alibi, Dog. The Hillis girl saw him running toward the library when she came out of the kitchen."

"She's his girl friend."

Shan snorted. "Where'd you get that idea? As far as I've been able to find out, last night was the first time she was ever out with him. However, did you know she had a bookkeeping job with Blue Belmont? And did you know she was Thad Turner's stepdaughter?"

"Who's Thad Turner?"

Shan said: "He was a right guy from way back. From Texas. Knew horses like you know a compass. When the girl's mother died, he sold out his spread and came to California. They say he took care of the little blonde like she was his own kid. Well, Thad couldn't stay away from horses. Before he was out here very long, he had a small stable. Somehow, he got mixed up with Blue Belmont and one day Thad Turner drove his car off Devil's Slide. That stopped the investigation that rumor said was beginning to get under way. It really looked like a suicide but, of course, Blue could have arranged the business. It was a break for him—the old boy kicked off.

"However you look at it, Blue made the old guy a fall-guy—and maybe his step-daughter didn't like it. Maybe that's why she got a job with Blue. And maybe that's why she came out of the kitchen the long way. The short way is through the dining room. And, I noticed, a quick turn brings you into the library in nothing flat."

"The gun was in my hand—not hers."

He shrugged. "I talked to her for quite a while today. I gave her the spiel about raising a defense fund and, what do you know—she says she'll shell out a hundred bucks. Now, does that make her a white woman with a heart, or a dame who is

beginning to feel the twinges of a guilty conscience?"

"She's all right, Shan," I interrupted. "I'll see that she gets her money back. Where'd you get the other five hundred?"

"Five twenty, to be exact. I never figured they'd pay that for old iron."

"You sold your car!"

"Smartest thing I ever did, Dog. Really didn't have much use for it. This way, you'll be sending me some dough when I may be needing it. Next year, perhaps—during the depression." He held out his glass to me.

"Thanks, Shan. Money will never pay you back—"

"Shut up. I talked to Montrose, too. He was patting Anita's wrist when I called. Know anything about him, Dog?"

I filled Shan's glass and put it on the floor next to him. "All I know about Montrose is that he's been along on a few parties. Anita has never paid much attention to him."

"I don't know why any woman should—but a lot of them have. I gather that he's a high-class gigolo. And it looks to me like he has ideas about the Widow Belmont. That's just about his speed, waiting for an opportunity instead of making one with a gun."

"He's not much good with a gun," I said. "How would you know, Dog?"

I told Shan about the drive down the coast road and the target practice in the gully. Slowly, he sat up and squinted at me. "Beelzebub couldn't have cooked up a better idea," he suddenly snarled.

I looked at him in amazement.

"Don't you know," he went on harshly, "that there's such a thing as a paraffin test? After you go bang-bang with a gun, the cops smear the stuff on your fist, and what do they find? Evidence, chump—evidence you've fired a gun. Don't you ever read the papers?" He glowered at me. "Someone was making damned sure you'd not only have a gun in your hand but—"

"But I didn't do any shooting with the others."

"You didn't!" He sank back on the couch and groaned. "Chump, could be you'd have been the only one who could've passed that test with flying colors. Is that why they let you make your get-away? If one of them did the shooting and stuck the rod in your paw when you were stinko—"

"You still think I've been framed, don't you?"

"What do you think, Dog?"

When I didn't answer, he went on. "You're a knothead, but you aren't a liar. Did you take your gun with you when you set out for your big night?"

"I did not."

"And you say that either Montrose or the girl could have got into your cabin. Now, get this—the ballistics report shows that your .38 did the dirty work. You didn't pack the rod with you. Do you think Montrose, perhaps, swiped the gat and, when you passed out, put it next to you so that you'd waken at just the right moment and shoot Br'er Belmont—and thereby create a rich widow?"

I bit my lips. "Well, it could've been like that. Give a gun to a drunk and God only knows what might happen."

"You might not have shot at all. Or you might've started using Montrose for a target—and he doesn't look like the kind of baby who'd take chances." He closed his eyes and was silently thoughtful.

I was thinking, too. I was thinking that I'd give just about anything if I could believe I was framed. Perhaps, if I hadn't seen myself with the gun—but that mirrored reflection haunted me. And the newspaper accounts: Montrose and Anita saw Belmont walk past them in the drawing room. There was a shot. Anita was already on her way to the library to—well, calm Blue down, perhaps. Fran Hillis, hurrying from the kitchen, saw Montrose running toward Anita who was just passing through the archway.

Fran Hillis. She'd told Shan she had never been out with Parks before. Yet Anita had told me she was crazy about the guy. Then I thought of how Parks had needled me about Anita's .25 and how Fran had tried to persuade me to fire it. The blonde out for revenge and Montrose out for a rich widow. They could make a team, couldn't they? And the blonde knew how to shoot, and there was a short way out of the kitchen, and she could've thrust the gun into my hand and rushed out through the dining room and, in giving Parks Montrose an alibi, she'd do as much for herself.

Could it have been done? There was a shot, a scream, and then there I was with a gun in my hand. It was—a possibility. I wouldn't have thought so ten minutes before—before I learned that my gun had been the murder weapon. Maybe—

And then I slumped back, dejected. If it were a frame, there was no way out of it. Guilty or innocent, if the police caught up with me, I'd land in the gas-house. I'd muffed whatever slim chance I had of escaping via the paraffin test. So, it was still just a question of skipping out of the country. That's what I said to Shan.

"But you still don't think it is a frame, do you?" He sighed heavily. "Well, I'm seeing Glinka tonight, but he doesn't get his claws on the green until you're aboard."

"Is this where I hole up until tomorrow?"

"Nope. I've got another dump all set. A fellow in the composing room is on his vacation and I wangled the keys to his place out of his pal." He chuckled briefly. "Well anyway, soon as it's dark, you'll stagger out of here, draped over my arm. And we'll take a cab up to Telegraph Hill."

"Telegraph Hill?"

"Uh huh. Don't they say the darkest spot is right under the candle? Anyhow, it's the best I could do, Dog. As you deduced, my apartment is out. I had callers about eleven and then I got a request to do my quiz kid act this afternoon. I put on a nice performance and Dickenson was almighty apologetic about bothering me. But I can bet that 1096 is being watched, right now. They know you haven't any dough or friends and they kind of think you just might try to look me up. How about having another drink?" He glanced at my almost full glass, then.

"I've had plenty," I said.

"A barn-door locker-upper, eh?" Shan said.

By nine o'clock, I was bedded down in a one-room apartment on the wrong side of Telegraph Hill. Children shrieked, dogs barked, and an accordion or two, or three, blared out raucously. Shan had left telling me he was on his way to see Glinka and for me to stay put until he returned in the morning.

I stayed put until nearly eleven. The first hour, after Shan had left, wasn't good. But the second was awful. I kept asking myself: *Suppose I'm not Killer Corson. What if I'm just Chump Corson?* If only I could talk to Anita, maybe she'd reveal something. Perhaps she'd seen a shadow dart from the library into the dining room. She might even know something about

those two—the butter blonde and the crooked smile.

But she'd told Shan she never wanted to hear my name again! Still, did that mean a thing? A distracted woman might say anything. Or maybe she sensed Shan's dislike of her, guessed he wasn't one of the crew from the *Southern Cross*, and surmised that he was a reporter—and she was trying to protect me by pretending we meant nothing to each other.

I had to speak with Anita. If she hated me now, I wouldn't blame her. But she wouldn't hate me. She couldn't. We'd been too much to each other.

I looked out of the window, up the slope into the twinkling lights. I'd made it from Powell to Montgomery in daylight, hadn't I?

I dressed. At ten minutes past eleven, I closed the door behind me and started up the hill. By then, I knew why I was going. I wasn't hoping to clear myself because I knew that couldn't be done. I was going because I had to hear Anita say that she'd meet me some day—somewhere.

As I neared the Belmont home, I slowed my pace. A peculiar chill swept over me. Would the police be expecting the murderer to return to the scene of his crime?"

Vaguely, I remembered the tall apartment house that flanked the Belmont place. I was just about to pass it when I saw a man coming toward me. He walked slowly. He was not in uniform. But either fear or instinct convinced me that he was a policeman. I glanced toward the apartment entrance. The door was opening; a couple was coming out. I entered the building before the door swung shut behind them and I stepped into the elevator. Hastily, I pressed a button.

I got out at the fourth floor, walked to the end of the hall and cautiously peered out of the window overlooking the fire escape. The solid figure was still walking slowly, but he had reversed his course. I knew, beyond all doubt, that he wasn't just a gentleman out for an evening stroll.

He was a cop—and he was waiting for me. But I had seen him first, and he wasn't going to get me.

I took the elevator down again and walked to the rear of the lobby. I located the trademen's entrance which opened into a narrow lane. It was a way out, if I wanted to return to my hiding place. But I didn't. I wanted to see Anita.

CHAPTER FIVE.

STORMY SEAS.

AT first it appeared impossible. But then I discovered the lightwell in the apartment building. And so, I made it from there onto the sun porch of the Belmont house. I landed hard. A wrought iron table overturned and its glass top shattered. Before I had time to wonder if the noise would bring the police running, the wide door opposite me opened wide and Anita, inexpressibly lovely in a long dress of filmy black, stood framed against the crystal and white of her drawing room.

I walked toward her, gently took her arm and closed the door behind us. "I had to see you again, darling."

She pulled away from me.

I grasped both her hands. "Listen to me, Anita. I want to tell you—"

She spoke, then, quickly and coolly. "Don't tell me you didn't murder Blue. I saw you."

"You—you saw me," I murmured. It wasn't her words—it was the coldness in her voice that stunned me.

"I saw you," she repeated. "When Blue came in like he did, without saying a word, and went right into the library—I was afraid of you." She laughed a short, bitter laugh. "And so I hurried after him. I saw you lift that gun before he even saw you. You shot him in the back of his head."

"And so you hate me for it?"

"Shouldn't I? I didn't love Blue—but I hate cowards and fools."

I'd let her hands go as she spoke. She walked toward a white satin wall and pulled a cord. The heavy drapery slipped aside revealing the windows which looked onto the street. She stood there, her hand upraised. She said quietly: "I have signaled the police that you are here. They thought it possible you would come back to try to see me."

Then she walked from the drawing room into the foyer and flung the front door open. Two men were bounding up the stairs.

I didn't think. I simply acted like any cornered animal would. Intent only upon running away, I lunged toward them. One of the men fell sideways along the railing, the other rolled backwards. I hurled down the stairs onto the pavement just as a dark sedan, with a squealing of brakes, stopped in the street directly in front of me.

Trapped. The thought meteored through my brain. Well, then. That'd be a better way to die than sniffing gas after months of waiting behind gray walls.

"Alan—Alan Corson!" It was a girl's voice coming from the car. The door next to the driver was open. "Get in!"

"Stop or I'll shoot!" That voice came from the foot of the stairs. I threw myself into the car. As it roared off, a bullet crashed through the window in back of me.

With screeching tires, the sedan made the turn at the corner to the accompaniment of a volley of bullets. I struggled with the door. A siren screamed. I got the door closed and glanced at the driver. It was the butter blonde.

We roared down a hill that looked like a minor precipice. The siren was wailing louder. We made another turn. "Where are we bound for?" I asked breathlessly.

"I don't know," she said. Her voice trembled. "I'm lost." She stopped the car with a back-wrenching jerk. We'd come to a dead end. "I don't know the town," she said hoarsely, backing the car around.

"I'll be completely lost in another few minutes, myself. Let's get out. Leave the car here. We won't get far in it with probably every squad car in the city turned loose in this section. There's a place we just passed where we can duck."

We back-tracked two blocks up the hill, keeping in the shadows and dodging into doorways and alleys wherever we heard a car approaching or when we glimpsed headlights. We were both trembling when we reached the one room apartment.

We didn't say a word for a couple of minutes, just stood there breathing hard and looking at each other. She was hatless, and her soft yellow hair was wind-blown. And yet, she looked so neat and clean, standing there against a backdrop of faded wall.

"I said: 'Will they be able to trace the automobile back to you?'"

She nodded.

"You've got yourself into a bad jam. Tell me. Fran—why are you doing this?"

She looked at me. "I've been parked opposite the Belmont house all day. I thought you might try to see—her. I wanted to head you off. I wanted to warn you. I wanted to talk to you. I know you didn't kill Blue—"

"Anita just told me that she saw me do it."

"I don't care what she says. I know what chloral hydrate is. Skid Malloy, in the club, has used it more than once. There was chloral hydrate in the drinks we had in the library. In your drinks—and mine. I didn't touch my glass until long after you had finished your three and—"

"And passed out. Well, maybe Montrose did load my drinks. Maybe he wanted to make time with Anita, and even put a gun alongside of me, hoping for the best."

"Chloral hydrate doesn't work like hasheesh. Even very obstreperous patrons who lose too much money gambling at The Blue Club become very relaxed after a Skid Malloy Special. They don't get murderous impulses. They just get sleepy."

"Did you tell the police about the dope?"

"Yes. But they weren't very impressed, Alan. There was no evidence to back me up. Anita Belmont, for perhaps the first time in her life, did some dishwashing. When I went out into the kitchen, the glasses were in the sink, thoroughly washed."

She reached out somewhat timidly and touched my arm. I looked down into her unturned face. She was as pretty as Anita was beautiful. Her eyes were not glowing and mysterious; they were gray and widely honest. Her mouth was a little too full and her nose a bit too short; but it was a nice combination. I realized I had not even seen her during all the hours we'd been together. Nor had I sensed her warm radiance. She was too nice a girl to get mixed up in the mess.

"No, Alan, the police weren't much impressed by anything I had to say. They believed that Thad Turner's stepdaughter was prejudiced regarding Mr. and Mrs. Belmont."

"You worked for Blue?"

She didn't answer right away. She walked over to a sag-seat chair and, after a second's hesitation, sank down on it. "I've worked for Blue these past two months. At first, I thought I was quite clever, getting into a position where I might find something which would finally involve Blue with the authorities; something that would be big enough to make him pay for what he did to Thad. But looking back,

I realize he knew who I was the day he hired me as his bookkeeper.

"He didn't need a bookkeeper, Alan. He handled those things his own way. But I think it amused him to see me trying so hard to pin something on him. Perhaps misery really does love company—and he was trying so hard to pin something on Anita so that he could get a divorce and re-marry Edith."

"He wanted a divorce?" I felt confused and strangely tense. "Is that why he arranged for you to join the party with us? Did he expect you to report to him?"

"He didn't know anything about the party. Anita asked me to have luncheon with her and, having reached the point where I realized that Blue was too clever for me, I accepted. I thought I might learn something from Mrs. Belmont. I was ready to give up, you see. Well, I lunched with her and Parks and then we went down to your ship."

She leaned forward and her eyes narrowed. "Oh, don't you see, Alan, how the cards were stacked! You were to be accused of murder and the only person who might testify on your behalf was discredited in advance—a girl who had good reason to hate Belmont. And, had they been extra lucky, the girl would've been groggy, too. They weren't overlooking a bet. You see, they had to make it a foursome. Parks had to be interested, apparently, in another girl. It would never do for the police to begin inquiring too closely into what was between Parks Montrose and Mrs. Belmont. They might find out what Blue suspected—and couldn't prove."

"I don't believe that," I said.

Fran Hillis went on quickly: "She never loved you, Alan. It was Parks, all along. I could see that. She might fool a man, but not a woman. I saw the way she looked at Parks. When he danced with me, she watched—fiercely. She was jealous."

It didn't add up. If Anita loved Parks Montrose and Belmont wanted a divorce, the answer was clear. Impatiently, I said as much to Fran.

"But it wasn't that simple, Alan. Anita Belmont was after Parks—but she also wanted Blue's money. It should be obvious, even to you, that Parks is a luxury a woman can't afford on mere alimony."

When I said nothing, Fran rose from the chair and came over to my side. "You still think you love her, don't you, Alan?"

"I know I do," I said wearily.

"It isn't love." There seemed to be a hint of anger in her voice. "It's sheer infatuation!"

"Well, what's the difference?"

"One person can become infatuated. But it takes two to love. And she never loved you. She couldn't. Otherwise, when she recovered from what the reporters called her 'collapse,' she couldn't have made the statement she did for the late editions of the papers. For Alan, when a woman's in love, she'll forgive her man anything. And she'll protect him."

"What did Anita say?"

"You haven't seen tonight's papers? You didn't read that Belmont's widow is an eye witness to the murder? 'I saw him kill Blue.' Is that the revelation of a woman in love? She's convicting you before you come to trial, convicting you not only of murder but of being an amorous fool for whom she had no use. She's carefully lifting her skirts clear of the mire so that the worst she'll ever be accused of is being so beautiful that she turned a man's head quite completely."

I felt her fingers press into my arm and I looked down into her angry eyes. I said: "I thought it was Blue you hated. I didn't know you hated Anita, too."

Her gaze did not falter. "It's not a matter of hating anybody. It's a matter of liking you. Oh, Alan—we can't let them get by with it."

"You think I've been framed?"

"Yes. From the very beginning. You were carefully chosen for the part. A stranger in a big city, a sailor easily dazzled by shore-side glitter, a man sufficiently good looking and personable so that no one would question a wealthy, beautiful woman's interest in him; and an unsophisticated soul who hadn't enough experience with women to know a wrong one when he met her. They must've spent quite some time finding you and setting the stage."

"You make it sound like a very elaborate plot."

"And it was. It was all timed so neatly, from the beginning until near the end when Anita suddenly thought coffee was very necessary. She asked me to make some, just before Blue was due to arrive."

"How'd she know he was due?"

"She knew because she was the one who called him. I found that out from Edith—

the first Mrs. Belmont. Edith spoke with me this morning. The police weren't interested in what she had to tell them because, I guess, it doesn't tie in with what they know. She said that Blue had phoned her, told her he had good news—that Anita had called an attorney and they were willing to talk things over regarding a divorce. That's why Blue hurried into the library."

"Walking right past Anita in the drawing room?"

"Perhaps—perhaps she wasn't in the drawing room, sitting next to Parks. She could have been in the library."

"Please, Fran—" I broke in. "It's swell of you and Shan to believe in me but—"

"Shan? Shannon Malone?" she asked.

"Yes. You know him. He visited you, asking for a contribution."

"He didn't tell me that was his name." She moistened her lips. "I assumed he was from your ship, Alan, the police are looking for Shannon Malone."

"Who told you that?"

"It was one of the last things I heard over the radio in my car, just before I picked you up. The police want to question Shannon Malone."

I wondered what had happened. Shan told me he'd talked his way past the inspector named Dickenson. Something new must have developed. Maybe we'd been seen leaving the Holy Cow. Maybe Glinka was what Shan suspected—a windbag.

I glanced down at my watch. Three a.m. As I looked up, I saw Fran regarding me quizzically. I said to her: "If it hadn't been for you, I'd probably be in the morgue."

It occurred to me that that would've been as good a place as any for me to be. It wasn't that I'd come around, exactly, to Shan's way of thinking that an existence one step ahead of the law would be mighty grim. It was more that I was beginning to wonder if my life were so damned precious that other people would have to pay plenty in order to let me live it. Even if I never dragged anyone else into my orbit, I already qualified as a heel. I might be able to keep away from the law by running away—but I wouldn't be able to run away from myself.

The girl must have sensed my need to be alone with my thoughts. She sat in the chair opposite me, her eyes closed. She wasn't dozing, although I could see that she was very tired. We were silent for a long time.

Then, as I walked over to the telephone,

she opened her eyes and looked at me inquiringly.

I said: "I want you to leave here in a few minutes. Go up to the top floor and stay there until after the excitement dies down."

"You are going to call the police?"

I didn't reply. I was thinking of how I was going to word what I had to say. I was going to make a deal. If they'd leave the girl and Malone out of it, I'd give myself up. I thought I had a bargaining point. I was, clearly enough, not an easy guy to catch up with.

It was a dial phone. I'd heard that calls made from them couldn't be traced. But I wasn't too sure. Suppose they wouldn't make any bargains, suppose they traced the call and broke in on us?

There was a light tapping on the door. I moved away from the phone and listened. I heard it again. I also heard: "Open up. It's me."

It was Shan.

CHAPTER SIX.

GORGEous LITTLE GUN MOLL.

HE closed the door behind him, tossed his hat on the table, pulled out a bottle, and then eased himself into the only big chair in the room. He manufactured a grin for Fran. "Hi, Blondy. How's about powdering your nose? I got business to talk over with Al."

"She stays," I said. "We're all in this mess together."

He nodded. "Well, I gathered as much listening to the radio cackling in Mitch's back room. They got you built up as a gun moll, sweetheart." He pushed the bottle toward me. "Build some drinks, Dog. We'll have a sort of going-away party. I got the trip all set. That old pirate didn't bat an eye. Four hundred for the ride and you pay him tomorrow night when you go aboard." He reached down and pulled out his wallet. "There's five hundred there and maybe Blondy's got another C note."

"Has Glinka got excursion rates?" I interrupted.

"Come again, Dog."

"Will he take three for the price of one? That's what I mean. I'm not pulling out, leaving you two to face the music. The police have a line on you as well as Fran. They're looking for you, too."

He grunted. "You're not telling me anything I don't know. La Belmont told the cops about a big gorgeous creature that came around soliciting dough for Corson's defense. If one of the boys from the paper hadn't tipped me off, I'd be in the pokey as of now."

He got up and went into the kitchenette and began making drinks. I said, "You'll be in the pokey, yet. What about the party in the composing room from whom you got the keys to this place? Won't he start putting two and two together when he reads you're suspected of keeping bad company?"

"Aw, he can't read," Shan said, handing Fran a glass.

"And," I went on, "what about her?"

"Well, as our British cousins would say, she arsked for it, didn't she?"

"I did," Fran said quietly, turning toward Shan. "Do you really think Alan can get out of the country?"

"He stands a chance."

"I'm not taking it, Shan."

He looked at me sharply. "Have you run across something that might clear you?"

"Not very much." I told him about learning that the drinks had been doped.

"I figured as much—but how can you prove it?"

He let go a deep breath. "Just the same, Dog, something might break if you stick around—Montrose, for instance. He's a spineless critter. If—if I were in your spot, I think I'd stick around and fight."

Fran Hillis muffled a sob. "He can't fight it. He doesn't believe in himself. He really thinks he killed Blue. If he has a chance to get away, Mr. Malone, you've got to persuade him to take it!"

"Why are you so damned eager to get him out of the picture, sister? What'll it get you?" Shan walked over toward her. "Are you in this with Belmont and Montrose? Have you figured that something might come up at the trial that wouldn't look nice and neat—and that it'd be better to let Corson make his get-away?" He caught her roughly by the shoulder.

I grasped his wrist. "Hands off, Shan."

The girl stood very straight. She hadn't flinched. She said quietly: "I'll answer your question, Mr. Malone. I'll tell you why I want to see him get away. It's because—because I like him. From the very first moment we met I liked him, even if he didn't see me at all. He's a swell guy, Mr. Malone. I know he's been framed. But he doesn't—"

Shan said: "Sorry, sweetheart. Honest I am. I had you figured for a white woman but you never can tell. And I've seen the deepest bluffs bring the damndest results, now and then. Once upon a time, I drew to an inside straight and—"

He kept on talking. He'd seen the girl and me look at each other and he couldn't have helped but guess how I felt. I was feeling plenty. Shan wanted to give me an opportunity to get my emotions in shape. He didn't know that something inside of me was beginning to unwind as I thought of the last six months—and wished I'd met a girl like Fran Hillis long ago. No, not a girl like her. Just her.

Absently, I lifted the glass from the table and, just as absently, put it down. They were both looking at me. Shan with a strange gentleness and the girl with a curious intensity. I reached for a cigarette. I'd smoke it and then I'd persuade Shan to call the police. He'd surely be able to make a deal with them. I'd put it up to him squarely—if he didn't call, I would. I opened the matchbook and lit my cigarette.

Fran Hillis said suddenly: "You're left-handed, aren't you?"

"You're very observing," I said. "Nobody ever seems to notice it except when I write."

"So what?" Shan muttered.

Fran Hillis gave him a quick glance. "Did you know it before now?"

"No," Shan admitted.

She was talking to him but her face was turned toward me. "If you were going to plant a gun in someone's hand, you'd naturally put it in his right hand—if you didn't know he was left-handed, wouldn't you?"

"But the gun was in my left hand," I said.

"It wasn't, Alan. Remember, I saw you with it."

"And I saw myself holding it, Fran," I said dully. "It's a picture I'll never forget. You were in it. And Montrose. You were in the archway and I was sitting on the couch—and the gun was in my hand. It was all framed there in that wide, mirrored wall."

I saw her startled glance explore the four walls of the small room. She hurried past me and opened a door. It led to the bathroom. "Go in there and take a drink—and look at yourself in the mirror when you lift the glass."

"I don't want a drink."

"Alan—please!" Her voice was urgent.

I walked into the bathroom and she thrust a glass in my hand. I lifted it.

"What do you see, Alan?"

"I see myself holding a drink."

"In which hand?"

I dropped the glass.

Shan groaned. "That's twelve-year-old scotch."

Fran lightly touched my arm. "Women know more about mirrors than men, Alan. In mirrors, you see things in reverse."

Shan started to say something. I didn't listen. I was staring into the mirror—and I was reremembering. One mirror reflection had paralyzed my reason; this one was restoring my wits. I began to remember.

I'd told Anita I was going to get rid of the gun and—

I remembered I transferred it from my right hand to my left in order to put it in my pocket. I am not the least bit ambidextrous. That was part of the elusive memory that had been in the back of my mind. That, and the recollection of feeling the weight of the weapon for only a moment or so. I'd passed Montrose on my way down the back stairway. He could have lifted it from my pocket to drop it where the police would be sure to find it.

Drunk or drugged, I'd never have shot with my right hand. Someone else had killed Blue Belmont! Montrose? No. He might've stolen the gun from my cabin, but he wasn't the murderer. Not only because Fran alibied him, but because he was—well, just Montrose. Still, he might get up nerve enough to give a murderer a helping hand.

I'd left the house by the rear entrance. Couldn't someone have entered that way—if Montrose had opened the door for him? And couldn't he have waited, unseen, until Blue Belmont strode into the library?

Of course, nobody would kill Belmont just to make a rich widow for Montrose to court, but—

It began shaping up. I recalled Shan saying that Belmont had been getting edgy. Was he anxious because his life had been threatened by some ambitious racketeers? Belmont wouldn't sell out. So, he had to be rubbed out. And what better way was there of getting Belmont out of the picture without causing the paper to bleat: *Eastern Gangsters Moving In On Frisco*. Get a drunken sailor to take the rap. And the widow will be glad to sell out. Business can go on as usual.

For a long time I stood there with my brain reeling and my heart pounding. Then I reached for the phone, "Take it, Shan. Call that fellow Dickenson and make a deal. Tell him you've persuaded me to give myself up, but I'm asking for fifteen minutes in the Belmont home—with Montrose among those present. At the end of that time, he can clap handcuffs on me—if he still wants to."

"You see a way out of the frame?"

"Yes." I bit the word off, trying to sound confident. I figured there was a chance. Maybe I don't know about men. I'd lived with men and worked with them; and fought and palled around with them for the past ten years. Yes, there was a chance. Maybe it was a hundred to one, but it was there. Now that I know I hadn't fired that gun, I was ready to take that chance.

"How are you going to handle it?" Shan asked.

"That's my business. All I ask is that you two stay out of it."

Fran shook her head. Malone said "Oh no. You don't get by with that, Galahad. Giving yourself up just to make it easy for us—"

"It's not like that," I started to say.

"I'm going with you," Fran said firmly.

And I argued for nearly an hour with the two swellest people in the world. But it didn't do me any good.

At nine a.m., they were in Anita Belmont's drawing room. A little while later, I entered by the way of the light-well and the sun porch. I didn't intend to be picked up and taken into custody before I shot the piece.

I saw Anita, first of all. She looked at me expressionlessly, then turned away. I felt myself going to pieces inside. She had said: *I saw you kill him*. But, I thought wildly, that's because she saw the gun in my hand, had seen Belmont's shattered skull. The shock produced by that scene had distorted her memory.

A metallic voice pulled me back to reality. "Alan Corson?"

I nodded to the big man with the red face who had come over to my side. It was Inspector Dickenson. He didn't like the set-up but, just the same, anyone could see he was glad to have me within arm's reach. He was tired of the hide-and-go-seek game I'd been playing; tired of seeing it splashed all over the newspapers.

He wasn't taking any chances on my bolting. I saw there were a couple of men stationed near the front door, and two others quietly took up their position in back of me.

In the far corner of the drawing room, I saw Shan. The girl was standing apart from him! apart from everybody else, too. Her eyes were turned my way, and her lips were parted as if breathing words of encouragement—or a prayer.

Inspector Dickenson had taken out his watch. He held it in his hand significantly. More than five of the fifteen minutes had passed. But I didn't need very many minutes. Not if Montrose was the kind of man I believed him to be.

I turned toward him. He was as debonair as ever, wearing his perfectly tailored clothes and his crooked smile. I smiled, too. He didn't seem to like that. He began examining his manicure.

"Montrose," I said sharply, "I came here under my own steam, not to give myself up but to straighten things out. Want to help? Could be, things will be a lot easier for you later if you talk now."

I was watching his hand. It was perfectly steady. Maybe I'd sized him up wrong. But no—Shan, too, had him classified as a gutless opportunist.

And then I began to panic inside. Gangsters were men—of sorts. Men enough, anyway, to recognize the weakening that was Montrose. They'd never have trusted this soft, pretty boy.

I moistened my lips. I didn't have that one chance in a hundred, after all. Montrose couldn't have been involved.

I glanced at Dickenson and hoped he'd remember his bargain and go easy on Malone and the girl. He was scowling at his watch. He appeared to be the kind of man who'd live up to a promise.

Well, I'd go on with the farce, I told myself. I'd play it out to the bitter end so that, later, Fran wouldn't reproach herself thinking I'd given myself up only to make it easier for her and Shan. I didn't want to go down in their memory books as that kind of a heroic louse.

I'd make it good. I'd make them see that I really could break down Montrose.

I said, lowering my voice so that the lie would sound more impressive: "Montrose, you were seen by a member of the crew of the *Southern Cross* when you entered my cabin. He watched you take my .38 and is willing to testify—"

I couldn't see if his hand were still steady. He had leaned back in the chair and had folded his arms.

I went on doggedly: "Miss Hillis is willing to testify that she saw you put chloral hydrate in my glass."

"That isn't so." It seemed to me that his voice was higher-pitched than usual.

"It is so. Furthermore, Montrose, Miss Hillis concealed that glass behind some tinned goods in the pantry. It's still there and, undoubtedly, the police will find your fingerprints on it."

"You told me you washed all the glasses, Anita!" Montrose shouted, his words running together hysterically.

"Don't talk, Parks. Corson's bluffing you. The glasses—" And then, Anita's voice was stilled. Dickenson wasn't a gentleman. Roughly, he had clapped a hand over her mouth.

"Don't talk?" Montrose shrieked. "Why should I keep my mouth shut and take the rap?" He gestured wildly. "Listen to me. It was all going to be a—a joke, Yes, that's it. A big joke. That's why I took Corson's gun. You got to believe me—I had nothing to do with killing Blue in the library. And she put the gun in Corson's hand. Afterwards, she made me drop the gun outside."

Anita wrenched herself free from Dickenson's hold. "Parks! Oh, My darling!" She was running toward him.

I turned aside. The anguish in her face was something I couldn't bear to look at. She was so terribly in love—and with a fool and a coward.

Only a fool would have been moved by what I had said. Only a coward would have broken so completely and shamelessly. And only a woman in love would ever have trusted Parks Montrose.

You'd think she'd have turned on that miserable, sniveling creature. But she didn't. The last words she said were:

"Parks, darling. You weren't to blame. I'll tell them that. I'll tell them everything." Then, turning toward the rest of us, she cried: "Yes, damn you all—I killed Blue! Parks had nothing to do with it!"

She wasn't thinking of herself. She was in love.

But, Parks had plenty to do with it. That came out later. Perhaps he didn't blueprint the murder, but he drove her

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DROP DEAD TWICE

By HANK SEARLS

It was a very nice job—definitely professional. And final. The blonde lay across the hotel bed lengthwise, a gleam of golden flesh showing above her stocking, but otherwise perfectly presentable. A white linen handkerchief was clutched in her hand. She had been mugged—strangled—throttled. Whatever you wanted to call it, the killer had quite thoroughly known his business.

It was no place for me. The package in my pocket was suddenly heavy. I lit a cigarette and did some fast thinking. The more I thought the worse it looked. The desk clerk had taken my name, phoned the room. The blonde had apparently answered the phone and told him to send me up. One short elevator ride later I had walked through the open door, called her name, and gone into the bedroom.

And she was dead.

What do you do when you find a corpse? In the movies, you call the cops. The cops come and they want to know what you're doing there. You can't explain. So they stick you in the clink, and you stay, innocent as a new-born babe, until some smart dick solves the crime. Then they spring you and everybody lives happily ever after.

But suppose nobody solves the crime?

Maybe you burn. Maybe they adjust that last, uncomfortable necktie and spring the trap door. No, this is California. They put you in a quiet private room with a bottle of cyanide gas and tell you to breathe deep.

Not me.

I flicked the cigarette out the window and took a powder. . . .

Lippy Fargo adjusted his expensive bathrobe over his fat little belly and showed me into his apartment. He motioned to a

chair in front of the big window and went to the bar.

"Whiskey, Pete?"

"A shot."

He waddled back with two glasses and plopped himself down opposite me.

"Did you give the stuff to her?"

I took the package out of my pocket and untied it. I removed four five-hundred dollar bills and tossed the package to Lippy. I said: The two grand is for services rendered. Cheap, considering."

Lippy counted the money absently. "Considering what?"

"Considering you tried to frame me."

Lippy's cherubic face turned red. "Suppose you quit talking in circles and tell me what happened."

"As if you didn't know."

"Look, Pete. I told you I'd give you five hundred bucks if you delivered the dough. You didn't deliver the dough and you kept two thousand. You better have a story worth two grand or else hand it over."

"You're damn lucky you're getting any of it back. If the cops had turned up there, you'd never have seen your money again."

"Cop? What cops?"

"The blonde was dead. Strangled."

Lippy looked up sharply. "Who did it?"

"You tell me. It just seems funny as hell that you sent me there, fat, dumb and happy, and there was somebody waiting to kill her between the time the desk clerk called and gave her my name and the time I got up to the apartment. It smells bad to me. How does it smell to you?"

Lippy shook his head. "So help me, Pete, I didn't have a thing to do with it."

"What were you paying off for?"

There was a long silence. "Sorry, Pete. That I can't tell you."

When a lady dabbles in blackmail, she's begging for a shroud—and so is the private dick who goes calling on her corpse!

I got up and walked to the window. "You better tell me, and it better be good, because I'm calling the cops in about two minutes and telling them why I was there."

Lippy raised himself with a grunt. He took my arm. "Don't do that, Pete. We're friends. You know I can't afford to get mixed up in anything like that. I'm on parole."

I swung around. "What about me? Am I going to be the fall guy? Why was I there? 'Well, I'll tell you, Inspector, I was looking for my cuff link. I was passing the hotel and it fell off and rolled through the lobby and up the stairs.' I paused. 'What'll I tell them?'

Lippy walked back to his chair and collapsed wearily.

"I don't know, Pete. It'll kill my wife. Ever since I got out, I've been clean. You know that. Most of the people here don't even know I've served time. My kid's in college—it'll ruin her. When the papers get hold of it . . ." He rubbed his hand over his eyes. "I don't know . . ."

I shook my head. "I'm sorry, Lippy. I don't know who did it. Maybe you don't either. But I've got to have a story when they pick me up, and it'll have to be the truth."

Lippy leaned forward intently. "You're smart, Pete. You can find out who did it. Name your own price. Just keep me out of it." His voice was desperate.

I looked out at the fog rolling into the bay. A foghorn moaned dismally. Lippy Fargo—reformed gambler. Worth sticking your neck out for? A good guy, a good friend, but . . . Finally I turned.

"OK. I'll take a crack at it. But I can't guarantee anything if the cops pick me up. And you'll have to come clean with me."

Lippy nodded. "OK, Pete. What do you want to know?"

"The pay-off. What was it for?"

Lippy took a deep breath. "Two years ago I was paroled. I wanted to get out of the gambling racket, and I was selling my clubs, one at a time. I went to Nevada to sell my Reno place—broke parole to do it. I was only there three days. I got in a game of stud with two other guys; Dude Wallon, a hood that used to work for me, and an Easterner named Wright."

"Dude was pretty drunk—he was just a gunman anyway—and he claimed this guy Wright was hiding an ace. Wright gives him

some lip, so Dude pulls a gun and kills him. Just like that. Then he looks in his coat for the ace. He looks up at me and grins. 'Wrong again,' he says. There was a girl in the room—Dude's girl. That was the blonde you saw."

I nodded. "So you couldn't report the murder without being caught violating your parole, and besides Dude and the girl might have claimed you did it."

"That's right. Well, Dude got rid of the body, somehow, and headed for the East—and that's all there was to it. Until I read this in the paper the other day."

He walked to a desk and rummaged around. Then he handed me a clipping.

VICTIM OF GANG WARFARE.

New York—May 10. The body of a man identified as John "Dude" Wallon was found floating in the East River today. Police believed that he was a victim of gang warfare.

"Well," Lippy continued, "the other day the blonde turns up. She's seen the clipping too, she says. She says that now Dude is dead it leaves only herself and me that know about Wright's murder, and she's awful broke, and could I spare twelve grand."

I whistled.

"I told her I'd think it over. I thought it over, and decided to pay. I figured she'd be back for more, but I had to protect my family, and what the hell—twelve grand. I didn't want to see her again myself, and you were the only guy I knew that I could trust with that kind of dough. That's the story, Pete."

I puffed at my cigarette. It sounded all right, but you never know.

"Can you think of anybody that might want to see the blonde murdered? Outside of you, that is?"

He shook his head. "No, not now."

I looked up. "What do you mean, *now*?"

"Well, when Dude worked for me he was quite a ladies' man. He dated this blonde you found dead, Sylvia Clinton, and a redhead named Flame Doreen that sang at the 411 Club, and I don't know how many others. The redhead didn't like the blonde, and vice versa. They had a fight once, right in my office. Dude stood there and laughed. But Dude's dead now, and there wouldn't have been any reason—"

I shook my head. "Were there any others?"

"Not that I know of. Of course, if she

was using blackmail as a steady diet, anybody might have done it."

I got up. "Well, Lippy, I'll think it over. But as I said, if the cops pick me up, I'll have to tell them why I was there."

I drove back to my hotel to get my stuff before the cops moved in. I cased the lounge carefully—there was no one there but the desk clerk and a few of the girls that hung out in the lobby. I opened my door and switched on the light.

"Hold it, Butler," said a voice in the shadows. I looked down the barrel of a Police Special. A little old guy wearing horn-rimmed glasses stood behind the gun, and an overgrown kid in a police uniform stood behind the little guy. I stayed where I was.

"Search him, John," said the little guy. The cop ambled over and went through my stuff. "This is him, Inspector," he said, looking at my driver's license. "He's a private eye and a sheriff's deputy and—say!" He whistled. "Two thousand dollars." He handed me back the wallet.

"Does murder pay that well nowadays?" asked the little man. "Maybe I'm in the wrong racket."

"Look," I explained, "I was going to call you guys. I just wanted to check on something first."

"Sure," said the Inspector. "Well, don't bother to call. The desk clerk found the girl."

"You're making a mistake. I didn't do it."

"Nobody ever does it, Mac. I've been working in Homicide for twenty years and I never found anybody that did it."

"Listen," I said reasonably. "You think I'd have left my right name at the desk if I'd gone up there to kill the girl?"

"In a word, yes. It's a very smart thing to do. It looks awfully good to a jury. That's why you'd do it, especially if you figured you might get caught anyway. To make it look better, though, you should have reported the crime. Yes, I think you did it, whether you left your name or not."

"Well, you're wrong."

"OK, so I'm wrong. What were you doing up there?"

Well, now was the time. I thought of Lippy, sweating it out at home. I thought of his wife—not a bad old girl. I thought of his daughter in college. I knew I'd hate myself for turning soft, but what can you do?

"Just a friendly call," I said.

"OK, John, slip the cuffs on him."

"Now wait a minute," I said. "I can—"

The big cop moved over and clicked a handcuff onto my wrist, and that was that. A handcuff makes a very decisive sound. He put the other cuff on himself. I felt like tail-end Charlie on a chain gang.

"Take him down to the car. I'm going to look around."

The cop marched me to the elevator. We stood behind the elevator boy, saying nothing, as we started down to the lobby. The cop towered on my right, a real tribute to American breakfast food: tall, broad, healthy. I eyed him speculatively. I thought of spending the next six months in the city jail with the prospect of graduating to a quiet grave in the municipal cemetery, and decided that it was worth trying. I never had much of a left, but if he had a glass jaw . . .

He did. I put everything I had into the blow, it went directly to the button, and he folded like a tired old man, almost pulling me down with him. The elevator boy turned, his face white.

"Mr. Butler, you shouldn't oughta have done that!"

"OK, sonny. Don't worry about it." I pulled the gun out of the cop's holster and the keys out of his pocket. I fumbled with the keys and tried two of them on the steel bracelet. The second one worked. "Let me out in the basement, and then let's see this elevator head for the top floor, and I mean the top floor."

I got out quickly, walked swiftly through the helps' quarters, and out the side door into an alley. I ran down the alley and on to the main street. I signaled a taxi and told the driver to take me to the 411 Club. I sat back and wiped the sweat off my brow. My hand was shaking. We'd gone three blocks before I heard the siren start to wail. . . .

I sat at a table in the back of the 411 Club and ordered a shot of whiskey and a bottle of beer. The 10 o'clock floor show was just coming on. I watched the girls swinging their legs, and listened to a refugee from a thirdrate burlesque try to make like a comedian, and heard a washed-up tenor murder *Mother Machree*. Then the redhead walked from the shadows, leaned on the piano, and began to sing.

She had creamy white skin and shimmer-

ing long hair the color of burnished copper. And sea-green eyes, and a shape that couldn't have been natural but obviously was. She was wearing a low-cut white evening dress that rippled when she moved and she had a low, husky voice. When she sang, she sang to every man in the place. When she stopped singing, a long, male sigh escaped the room, and then applause. She sang again. I called the waiter.

"Is that Flame Doreen?"

"Yeah. Oh, brother!"

"Tell her I'd like to see her. A friend of Dude Wallon." I slipped him a five-dollar bill. He looked at it critically.

"OK, mac, but you're wasting your time. Strictly no soap."

"Tell her anyway." The waiter moved off toward the wings of the stage.

In a few minutes she appeared out of a side door, looked over the audience, and crossed the dance floor. She slid into the seat opposite mine and looked me over coolly.

"Yes?"

Now what? I tore my gaze away from the green eyes. "Drink?"

She hesitated. "All right. Whiskey and soda."

I ordered it and sat back.

"Miss Doreen, I'd like to find out what you know about Sylvia Clinton."

Her face froze. "Plenty. Who wants to know?"

I flashed my wallet with its sheriff's deputy badge, and put it back into my pocket. A shadow of fear crossed her face.

"What do you want to know?"

"When did you see her last?" I asked, watching her eyes.

She studied her drink. "The other day. I ran into her on the street."

"She's dead."

The fear lingered in her eyes. She lit a cigarette and took a deep drag. Coolly she said:

"I'm so sorry. It couldn't have happened to a nicer person."

"Murdered."

"That I can believe. Well, is there anything else?"

"Where were you this afternoon?"

She hesitated. "Shopping."

"What did you buy?"

"Clothes."

"Where?"

She flushed angrily, her eyes sending out emerald sparks.

"You don't think I killed her?"

"Maybe."

"Look, Sherlock, why would I do it?"

"Jealousy."

"Don't be silly. On account of Dude? That's all over with, and for your information, Dude is dead."

"How do you know?"

She paused. "Maybe I read it in the paper—maybe somebody told me—I don't know: Anyway, I heard that he was killed. Now if you're all through . . ."

Something was wrong. I didn't know what, but her story didn't ring true. There was nothing I could do. I stood up.

"OK, sister. But for *your information*, I don't believe you were shopping."

I paid the bill and left the club, my hat down over my face. I hailed a cab and gave him Lippy's address . . .

Lippy was still up. He looked as if he'd had a tough night. His eyes were shadowed and his face was drawn. He let me in quickly.

He said, "Pete, thanks."

"Thanks for what?"

"Giving them the slip."

"How'd you find out about that?"

"The radio. They've broadcast your description. They have a dragnet out for you."

I sank wearily to the couch. "Oh, brother," I moaned. Lippy poured me a shot of whiskey. I gulped it and handed him back the glass.

"Well," I said finally, "I talked to the redhead. No soap."

Lippy shook his head. "She's the only one I can think of, Pete, and with Dude dead . . ."

I walked to the window. Lippy was right. With Dude dead, there was no reason for jealousy. That left Lippy. I began to wonder if I were getting the run-around. I turned.

"Listen, Lippy, I hope to hell you're playing ball with me, because if you're not, so help me, I'll—"

There was a crash of breaking glass and the roar of a gun. Automatically I hit the deck, grabbing for the lamp cord. I got a hand on it and pulled. The light went out. Silhouetted in the glare from the street I saw a shadow on the fire escape. I waited and then crawled to the window. Cautiously I poked my head over the ledge. Two stories below I heard a movement. Someone dropped to the pavement and a dark shape flitted into an alley. In the apartment house

across the street lights flicked on and people talked excitedly. I turned.

"You all right, Lippy?" I asked softly.

I heard Lippy grunt and the light clicked on. He was standing by the door, carefully inspecting a jagged hole in the stucco wall of the living room, a big hole with cracks radiating from it.

"Close," he said wearily, "but no cigar. Reminds me of the old days."

"Yeah." I lit a cigarette. "Who do you suppose has you on his list?"

Lippy shrugged. "Lots of people, I guess. Just the same, that doesn't happen every day. You suppose it's tied up some way with the blonde's murder?"

"I don't know. I do know I gotta get the hell out of here before the cops come to see who lit the firecracker."

The bedroom door opened and a tall, elderly lady with iron gray hair, still pretty, walked into the room in a negligee. Her face was a mask of fear.

"Lippy, are you all right? What happened?"

"It's okay, honey. Go back to bed. And don't worry. It's all over now."

I moved to the door.

"If you get any hot ideas, give me a ring at the Perry Hotel on Bush Street. I'll be registered under the name of Jones. Needless to say, don't mention I was here."

Lippy nodded. "Sorry I got you into this, Pete. I—"

I looked at the poor old guy standing there with his wife, scared and miserable.

"Forget it."

As I left the apartment I heard sirens screaming in the night. A streetcar was passing, almost empty, and I swung myself on. I got off on Bush Street and registered at the Perry Hotel. I went to my room and flopped on the bed.

I couldn't sleep. I lit a cigarette and watched a flashing neon sign play on the ceiling. On and off, on and off. The shadow of the fire-escape began to look like a gallows. I swung my feet over the side of the bed.

The redhead had been lying. About what, I didn't know. But she had been lying, and she was the missing link. Lippy hadn't killed the blonde; the redhead probably hadn't either, but she knew who had. I looked at my watch. It was one a.m.

The 411 Club was still crowded. The last show was almost over and the redhead was

singing. She saw me and faltered on a note. When the song was over and the applause had stopped, she walked swiftly through the cigarette smoke to my table.

"I thought you'd gone."

"I liked your performance so much in the first show that I decided I'd catch the second one."

"Yeah." She sat down again. I was surprised, and wary, but I ordered her a drink. She sipped it carefully, watching me with the clear, green eyes.

"I get off after the show," she said finally. "Sometimes this job bores me so much that I feel as if I have to go out afterwards."

"Well, I'll be damned, I thought, *Little Red Riding Hood asking the wolf in*.

"Is that so?"

"I guess when you're off duty you like to go out too?"

"Sometimes."

She looked into my face suddenly. There was fear in her eyes, and an almost pathetic hope.

"Will you take me somewhere after the show?"

"Where?"

"Anywhere. Someplace for a drink. Anywhere we can have a good time."

I thought of the cops crowding the town, working overtime. Looking for me. The redhead was frightened of something, and I wanted to know what it was, but it was no time to start painting the town red.

"No," I said. "Not tonight. What's frightening you?"

She looked up and laughed. "Frightening me? Don't be silly. I might ask you the same thing. Or don't you like redheads?"

"I like redheads, when they come clean with me. Not when they hide things."

She laughed nervously. "Well, this makes the first time in a long while that I've asked for a date and been turned down." She stood up, smiling, but the fear was still in her eyes. "Drop in some day when you're not working on a case—then I can turn you down."

She was off to the dressing room and I was alone. I wondered what had frightened her. Conscience? Maybe she couldn't bear to be alone. And yet, the strangler had been a man—a woman wouldn't have had the strength. And the handkerchief in the blonde's hand—it had been not a woman's but a man's handkerchief.

The handkerchief. It had been clean, freshly ironed. Not a handkerchief that had

come out of a hip pocket. A handkerchief that had come out of a breast pocket.

I ordered another drink.

Who wears a handkerchief in his breast pocket, nowadays? Flashy dressers. Dudes.

Dudes. Dude Wallon? But Wallon was dead. At least the paper had said he was dead. But was he? Who had identified him? The blonde had gone East with him. Had she identified the body? A guy like that, permanently erased from the police files, can start all over again. He can take care of all the people who have anything on him and begin a whole new life. From scratch.

Two people who had something on the Dude were the blonde and Lippy. The Reno murder. And where would Dude go if he came back West, if he returned from the grave? To a girl who had been in love with him—the redhead. He could hide away with her and take care of his old friends, one at a time. The blonde was gone, and somebody had taken a shot at Lippy. With Lippy dead the books would be closed and Dude could breathe freely.

Except for the redhead.

The redhead had been frightened. She hadn't wanted to go home. She'd been trying to tell me something all the time, thinking I was a cop. And I hadn't listened.

I shoved my chair away from the table and started for the stage. A waiter barred my way. He said, "No visitors backstage." I gave him a ten and he stepped aside.

I walked through the wings and down the corridor. I found a door with a star on it and the name *Flame Doreen* scrawled beneath it in chalk. I knocked. There was no answer. I opened the door and looked in. The room was a mess, but there was no one there.

I moved further down the hall and heard voices. I knocked on another door and opened it. There was a moment of silence. The room was filled with the girls from the chorus, in various stages of undress. A luscious young blonde looked at me blandly.

"Show's over, mister. Don't you knock?"

"I have to find out Miss Doreen's address."

The girls looked at me coldly. I pulled out my wallet and flashed the deputy's badge. The blonde shrugged.

"What's she done now? She lives at the Manchester Arms, on Wright Street."

"Thanks. And sorry." I walked swiftly out the back door and grabbed a taxi.

The Manchester Arms was a cheap apartment with all the trimmings. I asked the doorman for Miss Doreen's apartment and he winked at me sympathetically.

"It's 3A, brother, but you're a little late. There's a guy been up there all day, and he's still there."

"Personal friend of mine," I said, walking into the elevator.

I got off at the third floor and wandered down the hall, looking at the door numbers. When I came to 3A I stopped. Voices murmured inside. I put my ear to the door. I couldn't hear a word. I slipped the Police Special out of my pocket and lifted my hand to ring. Then I heard it—a low, desperate cry: "Dude—no!"

It was all I needed. I backed against the far wall and launched myself against the door. It was a cheap lock; it snapped easily. I crashed the door open and went on through.

A big guy, handsome, with a bronzed, hard face and curly blond hair, was leaning over a chair. His face was turned my way, frozen in fear and surprise. His hand flashed toward his coat. As he straightened I glimpsed the redhead lying sprawled in the chair.

"Hold it," I said. He hesitated. I stepped toward him and relieved him of a gun from a shoulder holster. The girl on the chair moaned and her eyelids flickered.

"Not this time, brother," I said. "The legal limit on murder is one a day."

He spit out a curse. I didn't like the way he did it so I let him have it, backhanded, across the mouth. "You don't make out as well with men as you do with women, do you, Dude?"

He watched me, his eyes glittering. The redhead sat up, holding her throat.

"I knew it," she whispered. "That's why I didn't want to come back. I knew it . . ."

"Call the cops, honey," I said. "Tell 'em it's Butler. Quick, before I lose control of the gun."

I motioned toward Wallon with the gun. "I wish I had time to work you over, Wallon. I'm afraid the cops are gonna be kind of inhibited. But you're going to get the gas chamber anyway, so it doesn't matter."

"Try and prove something, buddy. Try it."

"Where's your handkerchief?" I asked. He looked at his breast pocket and turned white. I said: "You should have checked

that before you left the blonde. I assume it has laundry marks on it—it shouldn't be very hard to prove."

There was a long silence and then footsteps down the hall. The gray-haired inspector stuck his head through the door. He saw me and whipped out his gun.

I said, "I'm working late, Inspector. Here's your man."

"Yeah? You're my man, brother. Put down that gun."

I nodded. "Watch him, Inspector. He's Dude Wallon." I tossed the gun on the floor.

The inspector's eyes bugged at the name. He hesitated.

I caught a swift movement from Dude. His hand flashed to his hip pocket and an automatic appeared from nowhere. He grabbed at the redhead and yanked her in front of him. "Outa my way," he whispered. "Outa my way."

The inspector's eyes glinted. Carefully he put away his gun. Wallon moved toward the door, shielding himself behind the girl. My

heart sank. If he got away, he'd get me if he had to track me to the end of the world. And as for the redhead—it would be curtains for her.

Wallon's face relaxed into a grin. "So long, you," he said to me. "I'll be seein' you again." He stepped into the hall.

There was the roar of a forty-five down the hall and Wallon's face froze incredulously. Slowly he turned, and suddenly crumpled to the floor. Footsteps hurried down the corridor. It was the big cop I'd slugged in the elevator. He kneeled by the corpse and turned it over. He looked up, his face a mask of horror.

"This isn't Butler!"

"That's right, son," said the inspector. "But I wouldn't be surprised if it was just as good."

"Better," I said. "Much better."

I turned to the redhead. She was white-faced and shaking like a leaf.

"Now honey," I said. "About that drink you wanted. I know a place . . ."

THE END.

AS HEALER. One Lady writes: "My sister suffered very badly for years, but since I gave her a Joan the Wad to keep near her she is much easier. Do you think this is due to Joan or the Water from the Lucky Well?"

AS LUCK BRINGER. Another writes: "Since the War my wife and I have been dogged by persistent ill-luck, and we seemed to be sinking lower and lower. One day someone sent us a Joan the Wad. We have never found out who it was, but coincidence if you like, within a week I got a much better job and my wife had some money left her. Since then we have never looked back and, needless to say, swear by 'Queen Joan'."

AS MATCHMAKER. A young girl wrote and informed me that she had had scores of boy friends, but it was not until she had visited Cornwall and taken Joan back with her that she met the boy of her dreams, and as they got better acquainted she discovered he also has "Joan the Wad."

AS PRIZEWINNER. A young man wrote us only last week: "For two years I entered competitions without luck, but since getting Joan the Wad I have frequently been successful although I have not won a big prize. But I know that . . . who won £2,000 in a competition, has one because I gave it him. When he won his £2,000 he gave me £100 for myself, so you see I have cause to thank 'Queen Joan'."

DO YOU BELIEVE IN LUCK?

JOAN THE WAD

is Queen of the Lucky Cornish Piskies. Thousands of persons all over the world claim that she has brought them Wonderful Luck in the way of Health, Wealth and Happiness.

HISTORY FREE FOR A STAMP

If you will send me your name and address, a 1/- stamp and a stamped addressed envelope for reply, I will send you a history of the Cornish Piskey folk, and the marvellous miracles they accomplish.

All you have to do is to send a 1s. stamp

196, JOAN'S COTTAGE,



AS SPECULATOR.

A man writes: "I had some shares that for several years I couldn't give away. They were 1/- shares, and all of a sudden they went up in the market to 7/9. I happened to be staring at Joan the Wad. Pure imagination, you may say, but I thought I saw her wink approvingly. I sold out, reinvested the money at greater profit and have prospered ever since."

and a stamped addressed envelope for the history to
LANIVET, BODMIN

SKID-ROW SLAUGHTER

By BRYCE WALTON

It didn't make any sense to the police. The case had fizzled early. First, they found Ferroni—once known respectfully as the Lightning Kid—in a vacant lot off Sunset Boulevard halfway to Beverly Hills. They found him one morning, beaten to death with a couple of blunt instruments. Fists.

Then a few days later, they found another blind ex-pugilist. This time it was the one-time light-heavy champ. Shuffling Jimmy Cohen. Shuffling Jimmy was akimbo under a palm tree by the La Brea Tar Pits. And he had also been given the treatment. And like Ferroni, he was dead, apparently by the same brutal method.

No leads, no apparent motive. And anyway, who cares about a couple of blind bums who had been begging and selling pencils on skid-row corners?

Andy Burkes decided that he did care. Burkes also decided to try doing something about it. He might not have decided had he not got a call from a rich and beautiful society dame in Beverly Hills. Her name was Betty Belem.

She called Burkes up at the *Chronicle*. She wanted to know why Burkes, a star sports reporter and an ex-fighter of some importance himself, didn't go out and find out what had happened to Ferroni and Shuffling Cohen. Didn't he know it was obviously tied in with the fight racket? Didn't he know more about the names and angles of that game than anybody else? It was flattering and convincing. And anyway, Burkes

felt keenly about the plight of ex-fighters. He had been seeking to provide for men like Ferroni and Cohen with the proceeds from an annuity to be granted by public subscription.

It was too late to benefit Ferroni and Shuffling Jimmy Cohen.

Betty Belem had provided some of the funds herself, mainly because she seemed to have a strong yen for fighters, blind or otherwise, and could always be seen at ring-side or down on Main Street at the gym watching the brawn work out. All of which was beside the point now.

Burkes took two weeks' vacation, supposedly to relax in the snow at Lake Arrowhead. After seven days of self-inflicted blindness, he was wishing strongly that he was at Arrowhead. Anywhere at all besides playing a blind ex-pugilist named Sammy Dane, with a battered hat full of pencils, a ragged coat around his shoulders, and a red-tipped cane by his side, on an East Fifth street corner.

The blindness was driving Burkes screwy, and he had about reached the limit.

There was life, people walking, cars running. Life all around Burkes where he squatted up against a cold lamp-post, listening to the rain, feeling the damp sogginess of his ragged clothes against his shivering skin. He could smell and hear things which was worse than if he'd been shut off from life completely. In fact, he was beginning to hear and smell things he could never have

Sports scribbler Andy Burkes had to play a lonely game of blindman's bluff to trap the iron-fisted killer of two sightless ex-pugs.

caught before. Compensation, the psychology boys called it.

He was beginning to catch little differences—shades of variation, in footfalls, voices, in laughter. The way a woman's heels sounded on wet concrete, or the way her skirts rustled, and the kind of perfume she used—these could now tell him a lot.

But his sharpened senses wouldn't be able to spot his prospective murderer. That was the trouble. Burkes was jumpy, his nerves scratchy. The tissue from the inside of egg-shells was put over the eyes, an old make-up trick supposed to have been used by the elder Lon Chaney. The eyes blinked over white film that gave a very convincing impression of blindness—more convincing than phony colored glasses. Onion eyes they were, filmed whiteness with the vague outlines of pupil and iris showing through.

The trouble was, Burkes couldn't see anything. He was blind. He was beginning to strain to catch details, to identify the source of the skid-row street noises. He could see, but very slightly. He could distinguish shapes, but the world was only varying degrees of formless gray. And now, as the evening fell, everything had turned into a dark smear.

In the smothering darkness, Burkes became aware of the shape that had materialized, a gray formless deeper darkness that told him someone was standing there. A husky voice said:

"You're Sammy Dane?"

A peculiar chill ran up Burkes' back. He didn't know why except that there was something in the voice, something maybe his sharpened ears caught. Maybe, he thought tensely, this is it.

"Yeah, I'm Sammy."

The real Sammy Dane was retired and living on a farm in Kansas. He was a friend, and Burkes had written him about the act he was going to pull. That part of it was covered. Burkes had grown a filthy beard, wore ragged clothes stained with red wine. Anyone could be under the dirt.

The husky voice went on:

"You been in town a few days, Sammy. Where'd you blow in from?"

"Kansas. Gets rough there in winter."

"Thought you was retired, Sammy."

"I was. But the retirement ran out, and then I couldn't find any friends. People forgot my name, so I headed West. Why?"

"Just wondering, that's all. Maybe you

remember hearing once about a guy named Hooks Leston. That's me. Hooks Leston."

Burkes had a phenomenal memory for sports-world names that went clear back to John L. So now he was glad he could remember what a person would expect only Sammy Dane to remember. "Sure, Hooks. Six years ago. Portland. You were fast and you were taking me—"

"All right, you remember. Let's drop it. I guess you wouldn't forget how you dropped me in the sixth."

"You been in town long, Hooks?"

Only the rain answered that one for a while. Then Hooks said softly: "A little while, Sammy. That ain't important."

"I didn't hear any more about you," Burkes said, "after Portland. You dropped out—"

Burkes' memory wasn't good enough to recall exactly what it was about the name Hooks Leston that it seemed important to remember right now. Anyway, Hooks had been a fall-guy, an ex-punching bag for the boys coming up. A story as old as the fight game. Somebody had to fall to make somebody else look good.

Hooks asked: "How's the pencil business, Sammy?"

"Lousy. I'm getting out of this town, if it ever stops raining."

"Let me buy you a beer. I guess we got plenty to talk about, Sammy."

Burkes got up, stretched stiff legs. He was aware of a dull ache in his head as he tried to strain through the gray curtain to see what it was that called itself Hooks Leston. "Sure," he said. "But I'm nearly broke. I got twenty cents in the hat, and I got to get a meal with it, sooner or later."

"I know a place, block away," the husky voice said. "This guy's a sucker for ex-pugs. And for a blind boy—he'll set 'em up."

If there was such a place around here, Burkes had never heard of it. He felt a hand on his coat. Burkes tapped with his cane, stumbled along with the hand guiding him. It's all right. Burkes thought quickly, I'm okay. I can slide this tissue off my eyes any time, and then I'll have all the advantage. The advantage of the unexpected, a blind man who suddenly had two good eyes. He had a blunt-nosed Smith and Wesson in his baggy pants pocket too.

So Burkes was led through the night rain by a voice that called itself Hooks Leston. He felt the cool rain falling in a dismal

stream. The dim, blurred lights of neons and lamps suddenly faded. He was on a side street, off the main drag. Wait a minute— They had turned without walking a full block. And they hadn't turned into a bar.

Hooks was leading him down an alley.

Burkes held back. Water slushed in his shoes. There was a smell of wet garbage. "Wait a minute, Hooks. Where you going?"

No answer.

"Hooks." Burkes turned quickly, feeling with the cane, and found the wall. He backed up against it. Water gurgled down a drain, splashed hard. Cold water trickled down his collar. He wanted desperately to rake that tissue off his eyes so he could see, but he knew that if this was going to count for anything, he had to follow it through.

Suddenly he heard the husky voice. "It's a helluva feeling, ain't it? Waiting for someone you can't see to take you?"

"Yeah," Burkes said. "Hooks, where's this bistro?"

"Take a little nap, and maybe you'll find it. In your dreams, Sammy!"

Burkes tried to get out from under it and the sap hit first against the brick wall. Before Burkes could move again, his head flew apart—so far apart he didn't even dream.

Burkes didn't open his eyes immediately when he began to realize he was conscious again. There was something comforting about the deep darkness behind his closed lids, like that of an ostrich with its head buried in sand.

He was sprawled out on a hard deck. He scratched his hand over it and found that it was canvas. In his few years of fighting, Burkes had been on his back like this only once. But was this the same kind of canvas? He groaned and sat up. The voice calling itself Hooks Leston came from above him, somewhere:

"Snap out of it, Sammy. You take a little knock on the head too hard."

"That's the way you handed it to me," Burkes mumbled. Then he opened his eyes, and tried to peer through the egg-shell tissue still over them. Instinctively his hand flew to his face to remove the tissue, but again he resisted. He wasn't bound. He was free to move around. But they had taken his clothing, including his .38, and now he was clothed only in a pair of boxer shorts; no shoes, no shirt.

A scared kind of curiosity had gripped Burkes, hard. Maybe he would have gone on as a light-heavy and gotten punchy and battered in the ring if he hadn't always been so curious. Curiosity could help make a top sports-reporter out of a pug. It could also get a man pounded to death as easily as it could a cat.

Burkes muttered some kind of an exclamation, then strained to catch a sound other than Hooks' voice. He wanted to hear some familiar sound, but there weren't any such sounds, none at all. There was a dead hot stillness around him, and no familiar noises. No streetcars, no automobiles, no cops' whistles, no traffic sounds of any kind, no voices or footsteps, no rain falling. Not even a clock ticking. It was like being waked inside a tomb.

Hooks' voice again came from somewhere above him: "Sammy, you made a big mistake blowing into L.A. When you heard what happened to Ferroni and Shuffling Jimmy, you should've jumped a hot-shot freight to anywhere else."

"What in hell's the idea?" Burkes asked. He sat there, his eyes fogged with grayness.

Hooks' voice said in a soft monotone, a sing-song kind of chanting: "Maybe you didn't hear about what happened to Ferroni and Shuffling Jimmy. But first, let me tell this. It was when you first started, Sammy. You sent me down for the count. I wasn't used to it yet. But remember how I was taking you for the first couple? Listen—I had the stuff all right, you know that? And then my eyes started going out. They knew it, but nobody cared. They went after my eyes, finished them. But then I guess you know what that means— huh, Sammy? To feel the lights go out."

Burkes ran his tongue carefully over his lips and inhaled deeply. Sweat crawled icily down his neck. That was what he had been trying to remember.

Hooks was blind too.

"Let me tell you what happened to Ferroni and Shuffling Jimmy," Hooks' voice said. "They died and they had it coming, and it was fair. I could always beat a man with a even break, but I got so few of those kind. I used to go out there and get pounded flat. The boos and sneers and yells came at me until I heard them in my sleep and I couldn't get away from them. 'Canvas back— Why don't you install a diving board?' They didn't

know my eyes were going. They wouldn't care even if they had've known. It went on a long time. Listen to this, Sammy. They boys they matched me with, they knew about it too. And they didn't care, either!"

The stillness was heavy, stifling. Burkes could hear his heart pounding, getting louder and louder. "How'd they die, Hooks? And why?"

Hooks' laughter was like a rotten fruit spilling into a gutter. "They died, Sammy, the way I died a thousand times. Only for them it was just one time. I gave them a break they never gave me. Nobody wanted to go ahead and finish me off. I was better off the way I was, just half dead. They finally lost their lights too, but that wasn't enough to satisfy me. They had something to remember, like you have. The nights you won titles and the big dough and the dames and a million glad-hands and the custom-made suits. But not me, hell no—not me, Sammy! Old canvas back! I couldn't remember anything like that. Not Hooks Leston—he was the most popular doormat, the punching bag, the pushover, the walkup! I made them look good when they came up. But I could fight, Sammy. You know that!"

"Sure you could," Burkes said thickly. "But what—?"

"Sammy—they needed me. I could make it look good, even though my lousy peepers were about gone and half the time I couldn't see a damned thing. And way after the peepers went out, I kept on going—"

Burkes wiped his mouth and flexed his fingers. "Why blame the other fighters?"

"They had their day, same as you, Sammy. I never did. I never got started. You helped finish me, too. Like Ferroni did, and Shuffling Jimmy Cohen. Didn't you think there was something screwy in the way I fought that night in Portland? I had you on the ropes for four terms, and then I was through. You knew why! You knew my eyes were going out. Black spots, bigger spots. By the fifth it was all black—black as all the rotten nights in hell. . . . You took me then!"

"I didn't know," Burkes said, but he knew what he said now didn't matter.

Hooks' voice was hard, a thick harsh whisper: "Sure you knew. Like Ferroni and Shuffling Jimmy did. But now we can finish it right. Now it's—even-steven."

"Wait! Listen, Hooks! You didn't have to keep on fighting."

"That's a laugh. Fighters are dumb, that's all they know."

"Hooks! Don't go on with this crazy thing. Listen to me—"

"I didn't think you'd squirm, Sammy. You always had guts. You were blind as a bat that match with Slugger Grange in Chicago. The way your seconds used to have to push you into the ring toward your boy so you could make contact with him. You couldn't even find him, had to feel for him. Real courage. I know, it was the same with me, only it went on a long time down in the sticks where nobody cared."

Burkes jumped up, backed across the canvas, cursing his own phony blindness now.

Two blind pugs fighting it out for a last title—alone . . . unobserved. It was crazy as you could get it. Where was he? How could a blind bum like Hooks drop a man in the alley, cart him away to an isolated place, a soundproofed room? A blind man couldn't maneuver like that. How about transportation?

Could someone else?

"Sammy—we're getting ready for a title match. The Lights-Out Champ. Just you and me. We'll have an imaginary audience out there. Dames with fur coats and faces not so good to look at right now. Ever notice that, Sammy, before your lights blew? How ugly those dames are at ringside, how their pretty mugs are all twisted up, look at 'em. They're enjoying watching us bat each others' brains out. We got to imagine the lights coming down, the sea of faces. We couldn't see them, even if they was really out there. Could we, Sammy?"

Burkes stood there, sweat running down his bare ribs. The air was close. The gray curtain pressed in. Hooks went on:

"Sammy—we just came swinging down the aisle . . . smell the crowd . . . now the blood's beginning to boil in us. Thousands of fans on their feet screaming for us. Seems like the roofs coming down on us. They love us, Sammy. Now we climb through the ropes . . . the crowd is deafening, ain't it . . . ain't that the way it's wrote up? Deafening? Now we wait—every second seems an hour. In a minute the bell will ring. We'll come dancing out . . . feeling around. The dames' faces are getting set. You'd think someone was gettin' ready to kiss those dames—that's the way they look, ain't it, Sammy?"

BLACK MASK

Muted, in the distance, Burkes heard it then. The soft dull roar of a crowd, swelling, rising. Underneath, he heard the slight scratching of a phonograph needle. Burkes swallowed heavily. A record with sound effects. The guy was setting up the stage.

The sounds around Burkes swelled, women laughing, men yelling, feet stamping.

Then a bell sounded. A real bell.

"This is it, Sammy. The bell—take it!"

Burkes dug into his eyes, slid the opaque tissue away. The sudden light was momentarily blinding. He blinked, and then he saw things in one full flash.

He was in a ring. He backed up to the ropes. Across from him, Hooks Leston crouched, a middle-weight in good shape, maybe thirty five years old, but lithe. He was in shorts, his chest bared, well-conditioned muscles relaxed. His fists were bare.

A bright flood-light was over the ring. Beyond it, Burkes saw bare walls rising in deep shadows, a staircase going up one side to a closed door. That was all. A ring put up inside a box-like, sound-proofed room—somewhere.

"And this time, it's even-steven, Sammy."

Burkes slipped along the ropes as quietly as possible, but Hooks caught the movement with ears sharpened beyond anything normal in human ears. His wiry tough body leaped in with blinding speed and ferocity. He lashed at Burkes with a long left to the head and then landed a right to the body and danced back, his face twisted in a battered, wolfish grin.

Blood trickled down Burkes' jaw. His chest burned where Hooks' right had dug.

"How was that, Sammy?"

Burkes didn't say anything. This time, he didn't move. He pressed down hard trying to stifle the sound of his breathing. If Hooks couldn't hear any sound at all, how could he— But he could hear. Hooks moved along the ropes, crouching, his battered face, the smashed nose gleaming with sweat.

"That won't work, Sammy. I can feel you out easy. I learned to do that. I can hear you. Maybe it ain't so even-up at that. I got it over you a little. I worked it from the black spots too long—"

With a savage speed, Hooks came in again, and even though Burkes could see, he didn't get away. He jabbed back, hard.

His pulse pounded now with a kind of sick fear. Hooks drilled him on the jaw with a short right. Burkes back-peddled for an instant, and Hooks was in after him.

From the hidden phonograph came a surging roar of voices, hands clapping, feet stomping. Then Burkes reached the body with a swift barrage of short, jolting blows and they went into a clinch.

Hooks' body trembled against Burkes' chest as he held on tight. He had all the advantage over Hooks. He could chop him down any time, he knew he could do that. But his stomach was hollow with nausea—he felt a surging pity for Hooks. . . .

The canned crowd sounds raised to a frenzy. Out of the crowd came a shrill woman's yell. "Kill 'em! Kill 'em!"

"Hear that, Sammy! They love us. We're heroes. Come on, mix it up, give 'em their money's worth. That's what they all want, ain't it—for us to kill each other?"

He heaved Burkes back into the ropes, slipped away, came in again fast. His blind milky eyes glittered sightlessly from his lop-sided face. He breathed quickly through his mouth.

This time, Hooks moved in to get it over with, and he threw two lefts. Burkes slipped under the second one, and hammered home a thumping right. Pain ran up from his fists into his head. Hooks countered with a sledging right.

The canned crowd was going wild, yelling for blood.

Terror grabbed hold of Burkes. For one long minute he felt as though he were dreaming, in the depths of a crazy nightmare. This was insane! What the hell, he ought to finish him, knock him out of here and to the cops. That was the idea. He could see; Hooks was blind. He could knock him off any time. He was in shape.

He parried two quick lefts, glided away from a loping right and jabbed twice inside left leads. He peppered Hooks' face a little, self defense sure, and if he could only bring himself to land a good one—but he felt like a heel. That was insane! This man was a killer.

Hooks bored in, kept boring. But Burkes could see. He boxed, and boxed Hooks off his feet. Over Hooks' left eye, a cut opened, streamed blood over his face. Otherwise, the man's face was suddenly pale. He was sucking at air, his chest heaving.

Hooks fell back, yelling wildly:

"Sammy! What is this, huh? You've got an edge, and that ain't right. It's even up, ain't it? You can't see and that makes it even up. So how could—?"

Hooks crouched. His mouth hung open, his blind eyes staring. His throat moved as he swallowed and his lips parted, flecked with moisture. Suddenly his voice rose to a shrill cry. "Sammy, you're sure—Sammy, you sure you can't see?"

Under his damp, straw-colored cowlick, Hooks' onion eyes seemed to brighten with a feverish longing, and his battered face twisted as he lunged in suddenly like a wild animal. A crushing right found its mark with eerie accuracy. But Burkes covered up, weathered it and pounded a couple into Hooks' mid-section, sent him into the ropes.

Hooks tried a desperate hay-maker right, and Burkes ducked easily. But he knew he wouldn't have ducked if he were blind. Knew that he would have been well on the way to join Ferroni and Shuffling Jimmy Cohen by now, if he were really blind.

The shrill yells of the canned mob echoed in his ears, had now taken on a terrible kind of reality, as he slid along the ropes, watching the twisted agony and uncertainty of Hooks' face. Then the crowd noises began slowly to fade. Above the din of sound, he heard a woman's voice, heard it again, louder, louder.

And too real. It wasn't on a record. *It was—live!*

Hooks spun around. He stared sightlessly, uncertainly, up those stairs at the door. A box-like room, broken only by a narrow stair ending in a narrow door. Burkes turned, saw a panel slide open at the top of a door like something at an exclusive gambling casino.

There was a blurred face framed in the tiny opening. A white, moist face, and bright eyes and a gleam of blue-black hair, the tight wet shine of red lips and white teeth, rogue spotting the chalk-pale face like spots on a clown's mask.

Vaguely, Burkes had felt that there was another party involved. Now Burkes felt that there was something familiar there, but the light wasn't good enough. Stronger degrees of familiarity came with the cold, yet somehow eager voice: "You're right, Hooks. He *can* see. He's a phony. I don't think he's even Sammy Dane."

An inflection, a peculiar speech pattern that was somehow masculine, shot the fact home to Burkes then, whether it was ridiculous or not.

The voice and the face belonged to—*Betty Belem!* He'd seen her around the Main Street gyms, at every good fight at the Stadium. A nice kind of number, but on the odd side. That was the impression Burkes had gotten. But maybe odd was hardly a strong enough term. She enjoyed watching brawn battered to pulp, but so did a lot of people, Betty Belem's reasons might be different than most spectators'.

Burkes didn't get it, not right then. She didn't recognize him beneath the beard and dirt, but what difference would it make if she did? He found out.

"Miss Belem," he called out. "That was a clever idea, phoning me at the *Chronicle*, suggesting that I try to find out what happened to Ferroni and Shuffling Jimmy Cohen. If you had anything to do with what happened to them, calling me was supposed to throw off any possible suspicion the cops might direct at you. Actually, Miss Belem, it could do just the opposite."

She gasped. "You're—Andy Burkes!"

"That's right. I acted on your suggestion—and I find you." His voice wasn't coming out very well. His jaws didn't work efficiently. "What's the idea?" he asked then, hardly expecting an answer.

The muted crowd noises from the hidden phonograph sounded very far away, as though Burkes had been punched until he was under the halfway mark of consciousness.

She laughed and the sound ran over Burkes skin like ice-water. "The fights got to boring me, Burkes. It's that simple. I ran into Hooks down at the gym, bumming nickels, a few weeks ago, and his persecution complex interested me. A persecution complex, Mr Burkes, is where somebody hates the world but isn't supposed to have a good reason for it. But usually there's plenty of reason. Hooks had plenty of reason to hate the world. He hated everybody, particularly the fighters who took advantage of him because he couldn't see.

"So I brought him here one night and told him I'd pay him well to stage a comeback—in his own class, of course. The blind boys' class. And I had another boy here. Ferroni. I had everything set up, and the idea of a blind fight to a finish interested me. It was even more interesting than I had expected. Hooks finished Ferroni all right,

permanently. So next it was Shuffling Jimmy Cohen. . . ."

"Why should your poor dumb stooge here kill them?" Burkes said.

"Why you—" Hooks lunged, and Burkes danced out of the way. Hooks crouched in the center of the ring, his lips flecked with moisture.

"With Ferroni maybe it was an accident," said Betty Belem. "But then Hooks liked it. With Shuffling Jimmy, I suggested to Hooks that he should finish that one too. It's more interesting to watch that way. And Hooks can't say he doesn't get a kick out of finishing it. Can you, Hooks?"

Hooks didn't say anything. He kept his unseeing eyes fixed on Burkes.

"You're crazy," Burkes said, and after he said it he realized that it was a little obvious to put into words. Her motivations weren't sane, and they weren't really important. He was in a spot and he had to get out of it, that was the only important thing. She hated men, maybe. A bored society girl. Let some fifty-buck-a-session psychiatrist figure it out sometime, Burkes thought, except that now it would scarcely benefit anyone.

He saw the glint of a gun in her hand, as she poked it through the small door. His gun. "Recognize this, Mr. Andy Burkes? This is even more interesting than the other two set-ups. I've got a gun behind a locked door. This is the only way out of here. And when you're finished, I can take you out and dump you somewhere."

"I was watched all the time by cops," Burkes said. "They've followed you when you brought me here—"

There was a brief silence except for Hooks' heavy breathing.

"I don't really believe that," she said then. "But even if it's so, so what? They'd never find this room and even if they did make that kind of search, I'd have the room cleaned up, the ring gone, and you'd be gone too. They can never prove anything on me."

"They saw your car drive into that alley and get me," Burkes said.

"It wasn't my car. I rented it under another name, and they can never trace that car to me. And, anyway, I know you're lying. The cops don't have enough imagination to help anybody pull an act like yours. And even if you were telling the truth, they could never get here in time to do you any good. This is going to be very interesting to me, Mr. Burkes. I'm not going to use this gun. Hooks can—"

Burkes made a dive for Hooks with an idea of using him for a shield or something. He didn't know exactly what, except that he had to move.

The lights went out.

Her voice came out of the darkness. Her laugh came down to him like a decaying smell drifting over stagnant water. "I'm sorry I can't see this, Mr. Burkes. But I can imagine how interesting it's going to be. You came here, pretending to be a blind fighter, well—now you are. . . . Now it's even-steven. Hooks—so finish him!"

It was pitch dark, and Burkes couldn't see a thing but a black wall.

He tried to hold his breath down. The lights going out didn't mean anything to Hooks Leston. For him, the lights had been out a long time—too long. The crowd noise began to swell from the phonograph.

"Wait a minute, Hooks," Burkes whispered. "Listen to me!"

"I'm going to finish you, like Ferroni and Shuffling Jimmy."

"Hooks! Don't let her make a fool out of us. You'll get it, too, sooner or later. Listen to that crowd, Hooks! She's the crowd, the crowd you hate. Can't you understand that? She's up there gloating, while we kill each other."

An iron-hard fist crashed into Burkes' face from the black wall. He stumbled and sagged on the ropes, then managed to roll and drop to one knee and felt the *whissssh* of air as another blow barely missed.

"Why blame the others fighters?" Burkes choked.

"They knew about me," Hooks said. "They used me. You knew."

"You're blaming the wrong people, Hooks! How about the docs, they sent you in to fight when they knew you couldn't see. What about your managers who kept on booking you? And the Commissions—"

The darkness drowned the words like meaningless drops of water in a black sea. It was uncanny the way Hooks found his face again with sharp, hard chopping blows. And Burkes tried to cover up, tried to find something in the darkness. But his fists flailed helplessly.

Warm liquid ran down his throat. His head was spinning crazily and his knees were wobbly. He crawled as noiselessly as he could across the canvas. A toe sank into his ribs, and fiery pain filled up his chest.

Burkes tried to stay on his feet after he pulled himself up there. A savage right whipped into his mouth. Blood rippled from

his nostrils. He staggered back, peddled into the ropes, spun away. His eyes probed desperately, but the dark was solid, thicker now if anything.

Short jabs suddenly pelted Burkes. He went off balance and a haymaker caught him between the eyes and lights crackled as he went down to one knee. He swallowed and wiped at his eyes, tried to get his legs straightened out. Then he dived outward toward the ropes—tried to get out of the ring.

A toe caught him across the face and he sagged, groaning.

The dazed realization came to him then; he remembered how it had been back there on that skid-row corner. Compensation. After seven days blindness, his ears, his nose, had sharpened. He concentrated now. There—it worked—now he thought he could hear Hooks' feet coming in . . . soft and distant, moving across the canvas.

Gathering the strength from somewhere, Burkes spun, dived wildly, clutched, felt his fingers close on Hooks' ankles. He curled his body, jerked his hands, and Hooks thudded on the canvas.

Burkes came on forward and chopped down hard with both hands. He felt Hooks' face under his fists. He chopped harder. Hooks groaned thickly. Burkes dug one hand into Hooks' throat, slammed the head down on the canvas.

A shudder ran down Hooks' body. His heels beat a fading tattoo on the canvas, then the body went limp.

Burkes dragged Hooks across the ring, away from the stairs, rolled him through the ropes and heard the dull thud as he hit the floor. Burkes sucked painfully for air as he crawled out of the ring.

And after a while, the crowd from the phonograph started to fade. Burkes crept up the stairs, noiselessly like an animal. That was the way he felt, like an animal hunting in a dark jungle. He was sick. He was in bad shape. He couldn't get his teeth together and his face was swelling and bleeding.

Suddenly the crowd noises died completely, and Betty Belem's voice stabbed down through the darkness. "Hooks!"

The silence throbbed.

"Hooks! You got him?"

Burkes tried to smile. He went on up the stairs, making no noise that ordinary human ears could hear, and flattened with his back against the wall next to the door.

"Hooks! Answer me—"

Hooks didn't answer. Her own voice echoed a while, then the silence swept back again.

"Can't you hear me, Hooks? *Hooks, he didn't get you?*"

Minutes passed. He heard the panel in the door slide open slowly. Her voice called out again, several times, rising sharply, becoming tinged with hysteria. And then Burkes shifted a little. Suddenly, the lights flooded down. Burkes heard her hoarse breathing, caught the glint of the gun she poked through the panel.

Her voice went to pieces, fell jangling through the room. "Hooks! . . . Where are you—Burkes?"

Burkes sprang and gripped the gun wrist, bent it down, hard. The gun went off, the bullet whined across the room. He twisted harder. The gun dropped out of her fingers. All he could see through the opening was her hair.

"Open the door," he yelled. He moved on through, slamming her back.

He followed up as she stumbled over a coffee-table trying to get to another door. Glass shattered and she was crawling desperately. Burkes froze as she stopped crawling and rolled over and looked up at him. She held a glass vial in one hand near her mouth.

"If the cops were coming, I was ready," she said. "When the fun ends, I want to end it. My way."

She was nice to look at, Burkes thought wearily, even now. She was slim. And a pale green dress accentuated her midnight hair. Her feet and ankles were small and her legs shapely. An artist would rave about her body.

None of which reflected the ugliness that shone from behind her eyes.

Before he could decide what to do, she emptied the vial into her mouth.

She whispered faintly: "You cheated me, Mr. Burkes. That was probably the best fight of them all—and I didn't get to see it."

"You turned off the lights," Burkes said.

She nodded, then she died.

Burkes found his way up out of the basement where she had staged the blind bouts, and from an upstairs that was very rich and quiet and comfortable, he phoned the police. "I'll be at the *Chronicle*, if you want to know any more about it," he said.

It was a good story, a little off his beat, but good—if you wanted to look at it that way. He went out into the rain and walked down the drive toward Sunset Boulevard.

EPITAPH for an EAGER BEAVER

By JOHN P. FORAN

PATROLMAN FRANK CARRAN called in at one o'clock from the box at the north end of his beat. He reported everything quiet, then jotted down the license number of a stolen car.

"Never get any of those from your beat, do we?" commented the sergeant sarcastically, and hung up.

Or anything else, thought Frank, closing the box.

He stood there looking down the quiet darkness of First Avenue. Dim night lights glowing in the store windows. A lone pedestrian hurrying homeward. A black car hugging the curb, ignition locked off, windows carefully closed against night prowlers.

At the south end of his beat a neon sign pushed a sullen redness against the night: *Tony's Bar and Grill*. Brittle white lights gleamed on four cars parked in front. A blast of music poured out ahead of a departing couple. The brash noise swaggered against the quietness of the avenue and faded guiltily into the side streets.

Frank walked his beat, remembering Lieutenant Ames, the instructor at the Police Academy. "Know your beat if you want to get promoted," Ames had drummed at them, "And that means every little detail. It's the details—" he'd stressed it over and over—"the little things that add up to the pay-off. Get to know everyone on your beat, check the layout of each store. . . ."

It went on and on and some of the rookies became bored, others gleefully aped

the lieutenant's voice and gestures. But Frank didn't have time for boredom or horseplay. Realizing he was listening to a summation of years of practical police knowledge, he concentrated on retaining everything Ames told the class, and when he was assigned to a beat on First Avenue, he set about putting the lieutenant's advice into practice.

He got to know the owner of each store and apartment house. He checked every lock, night light, the hour each store opened and closed. And on his own time he went over each hallway, back stairway, alley and roof until he could have done it blindfolded.

The merchants on the avenue met this unusual activity with a hostile silence. Firmly convinced the new patrolman was working up to a new form of graft, they fought back. The sergeant started checking on Frank; the lieutenant went out of his way to talk to him. Nothing was put into words. There was no mention of graft, just a watchfulness, a warning about a new man overdoing things.

The only one on the avenue who didn't start out resenting Frank's efforts was Tony Manero, the owner of Tony's Bar and Grill. Tony was tall and solidly built, his face swarthy, his dark eyes coldly observant. His jaw muscles bulged as he chewed a wad of gum slowly and deliberately.

That was the way he looked up at Frank the first time from behind his desk in the rear office, once used as a gaming room.

Patrolman Frank Carran was just a little guy with a sharp eye for details—and the stubborn determination to whittle a big-shot killer down to sizzle-seat size.

He chewed slowly and methodically until Frank finished.

"The new broom, eh?" he grinned. "Suits me, Carran. I have a big place over on the west side, so I don't have much time for Tony's. A few minutes at closing. This was my old man's place and I'm kinda sentimental about it. So anything you want—within reason." He chewed slowly, his dark eyes putting a warning edge to his words.

A couple of weeks later, about three in the morning, Frank found Tony's car parked off the avenue, the ignition key still in the lock. Frank took the keys and locked the door. He went into Tony's.

Tony looked up as Frank came into the office. His eyes turned watchful.

"You left them in the car." Frank bounced the keys in his hand.

"Oh?" An apologetic smile broke Tony's chewing rhythm. "Guess I forgot. Thanks." He held out a hand.

"Tomorrow night," said Frank, dropping the keys into his pocket. "After you make out a check to the Police Athletic League."

"Tomorrow!" flashed Tony. "How am I going to get home? I never ride in any other car but my own! Ask anyone—"

"And if you do it again," Frank went on, knowing but ignoring the fact that he was exceeding his authority, "you'll double the check and lose the use of the car for a week."

Surprise, swift anger flamed in Tony's eyes. He smiled, went on chewing. "Well!" He looked as though he'd made a startling discovery: Frank was an honest, sincere patrolman.

Word passed up and down the avenue that Frank wasn't a grafter, that his bite was confined to a small contribution to the PAL when temptation was put in the way of law-breakers. The word passed slowly, doubtfully, and wasn't cheerfully accepted until the following months, singularly free of crime, grew into positive proof.

From then on Frank walked his beat with increasing confidence. He grinned inwardly as he thought of the words, *Above and beyond the call of duty*. The grin was mocking but underneath there was a quiet satisfaction, a glow of pride.

Frank tried the locked doors as he walked his beat. The drugstore on the corner, then Silverman's candy store, Markel's delicatessen. He smiled as he

thought of Mrs. Markel, short and wiry and possessed of boundless faith in human nature.

"Officer Frank Carran," she'd say, beaming up at him. "Such a nice man, Officer Frank Carran."

Frank stopped in the barbershop doorway, tried the lock. The night light gleamed on the still white chairs. He turned in the shadowy doorway as a big black car rolled to the curb. The car lights snapped off. The door opened. A slim foot found the curb under a billowing skirt. Dark hair swirled, disclosing a pretty laughing face. She ran lightly into Twelve Twenty-one.

Cinderella, he thought. Cinderella returning home late. His eyes swung to the car. The man was climbing out, a big solid man, the white of his starched shirt front gleaming. Tony Manero. The big black car suddenly turned into a pumpkin driven by a very large rat.

Tony followed her into the house and Frank went on, puzzling over why he'd never seen the girl before. Probably lived over on the West side—she looked like the West side—and thought Tony glamorous and exciting. A First Avenue girl wouldn't be so foolish.

But Tony doesn't live in Twelve Twenty-one, either, he thought, and stopped and looked back. Tony came out and climbed into the car. He touched the horn lightly driving past and Frank lifted his nightstick in answer.

So she did live on the avenue and went out with Tony anyway. He struggled with an unaccountable rush of anger, of disappointment. Well, let her, he thought, dismissing her. She isn't the first girl blinded by the glitter of the night club crowd.

Annoyed, he found he had to keep on dismissing her. At the oddest moments he'd remember her trim foot touching the sidewalk, the way she looked over her shoulder, the vividness of her smile. Exasperated, he found himself watching for her to go to work, and when he was on four to twelve, for her to return home. But he didn't see her again after that first brief glimpse.

Frank wasn't the only one concerned with the fact that he didn't get to meet Helen Bradley. Mrs. Markel was like a mother to Helen and like a mother she fussed. When Helen came in to bring the store's accounts up to date, she started right in. She simply couldn't understand why

a nice girl like Helen preferred to work on books when she could be working on an honest, industrious man like Officer Frank Carran.

Helen's smiling evasiveness exasperated Mrs. Markel. She shifted her attack. The next evening Helen was due to work on the books, Mrs. Markel chased her protesting husband home and was waiting when Helen came in. A nice cup of coffee they should have in back before Helen started to work. Cakes maybe, fresh in that afternoon, while they gossiped like ladies.

Mrs. Markel promptly gossiped around to the new patrolman. So honest, so efficient, a sergeant in no time. And then—who could tell?—a lieutenant even. And so tall and so polite, she beamed, such a loneliness in his eyes for the right girl to—

The front door opened. "A customer, maybe?" said Mrs. Markel vaguely. Steps came toward the rear, and when Mrs. Markel didn't move, Helen started up.

Frank appeared in the doorway. He saw Helen standing by the table and a startled, "Oh," escaped his lips. "It's—it's after ten, Mrs. Markel," he said, unable to take his eyes from Helen. She looked different in a gray suit, cool and efficient, and somehow prettier than he remembered.

"Oh, dear," fluttered Mrs. Markel. "So soon? My, time flies when two ladies gossip. I'm so sorry. We were going over the books—"

Irritated by Mrs. Markel's profuse apology, Helen said, "Is there a law against closing after ten?"

"No law," said Frank quietly. "I was just—"

"Just hounding a poor shopkeeper, is that it?" Her voice was a shaft of contempt driven by the anger in her eyes.

"Please, Helen," said Mrs. Markel, distressed. "Officer Frank Carran isn't hounding. He's just telling us we usually close at ten and he came in to find out if there's anything wrong. See how efficient?" She stared at Helen, puzzled. "But I was telling you, Helen. This is Officer Frank Carran, Helen." She started bustling. "Now go along like a nice girl."

Exasperated, Helen said, "But I haven't even touched the books—"

"How nice. You don't have to stop. Officer Frank Carran can walk you home. Two blocks down," she said to Frank. "Twelve Twenty-one, apartment—"

"Mrs. Markel!"

Frank walked Helen home. He came out of Markel's smarting under the sting of her contempt and they walked the first block in silence. He cleared his throat. "I—I don't want you to think—I like Mrs. Markel. I wouldn't—"

"I know you wouldn't," she said quickly, contritely. "It was just—well, Mrs. Markel means well, but—" She laughed, "I'm sorry," she said.

Her apology was clean and direct, nothing held back. He liked that. "What's this about the store's books?" he asked.

"I work on the books one evening a week," she told him. "I've been doing it ever since I went to high school."

"Oh, you're a bookkeeper."

"No, I model." His puzzled look brought a smile. "It was Mrs. Markel's way of helping mother put me through school. She paid mother five times what I was worth."

"Oh. And you go on paying her back." "I like doing it," she said simply.

Impressed by her loyalty, Frank wondered how he could have thought her giddy and frivolous. How could he have been so wrong?

"This might sound a little sudden," he said quickly—they were standing in front of Twelve Twenty-one and conscious of it, and Frank was afraid she'd say good night before he could ask. "I mean, if I didn't explain I've been looking for you for weeks. Ever since I saw you with Tony Manero."

"Oh?"

He was so intent he barely sensed the way she stiffened. "To make a date," he said, afraid he was doing it badly. "So it isn't like I'm asking you for the first time."

"Well, that's one way of putting it," she smiled.

"Monday night?" he asked quickly. "I'm on days next week. I'll meet you at eight."

"Make it Wednesday night," she amended.

A box of candy to Mrs. Markel, he thought as he went on down the avenue twirling his nightstick. And a dozen roses to Helen Wednesday evening. But why wait? A dozen roses tomorrow with thank you note. She'd like that.

He bought another dozen roses Wednesday, and when he gave them to Helen he realized, in spite of her delight, that he should have bought a corsage instead.

Tony would have known enough to do that.

They had dinner in a little Italian place over on the West side. After a diffident start, Frank got to talking about his beat, how he was putting Lieutenant Ames' instructions into practice and how well it was turning out. He came up with an endless fund of details, and as he did so he mimicked Markel growling suspiciously, Harry, the druggist, shrugging and spreading his hands, Tony chewing with a deliberate rhythm.

Helen was amused by his expert mimicry. "I've lived on the avenue all my life," she said admiringly, "and yet—well, I never realized there were so many facets to it."

"There's one I've been wondering about," he said. "You and Tony Manero."

"What about Tony?" she said, and this time he noticed the way she stiffened.

Frank hesitated. "Well, Tony may be handsome and glamorous—" He stopped, realizing he was using the wrong approach but unable to think of another. "He may own a big night club and get a lot of favorable comment in the Broadway columns—" He stopped again, wishing he hadn't started it.

"Go on," she said coldly.

He drew in a breath and pushed the words against the pressure of her eyes. "He's still a cold-blooded killer."

"I see."

"You must know Tony killed Patsy Ciano and dumped his body in the river."

"Oh, you were there?" Her expression was surprised, her voice innocent.

"Well, no. I was studying at the police academy at the time."

"And where was Tony when Patsy was killed?"

"Well—"

She let it go then. Eyes blazing, she leaned toward him "Was Tony in the rectory of the Sacred Heart church at the time Patsy was murdered?" she flung at him.

"Yes, but—"

"And was Tony trying to get Father Nasche to accept a five hundred dollar donation to the Boys Club?"

"That's what Tony claimed—"

"And what Father Nasche testified!" she blazed.

"Tony murdered Patsy," he said doggedly, his dismay unable to stem the

urgency to make her understand. "Somehow he rigged it so Father Nasche had to alibi him, but he killed Patsy. I know it!"

She sat back, her eyes taking him apart. "So you're one of those," she said contemptuously.

Frank flushed. "One of who?"

"Little people who spend all their time spreading vicious gossip about big people. You meet them everywhere," she went on witheringly, "their little minds clutching a small thought, fondling it, feeding it, living for it. Little people who are so busy being small they never become anything else."

"I know Tony killed Patsy," he repeated stubbornly, angrily.

"Is this why you made a date with me?" she demanded.

"Oh, no." Frank put his hands out. "No. Please don't go. I'm sorry," he said. "I guess I've ruined everything, and I was so anxious for it to turn out just right."

Helen hesitated, her eyes still smoldering. "All right," she decided, "let's forget it." She glanced at her watch. "We'd better get started if we want to make the last show."

When they returned to Twelve Twenty-one Frank didn't have much hope, but he asked anyway. "Do you want to do it again next Wednesday?"

"I have a date with Tony," she said, and he sensed her decision would come out of his reaction. "Saturday night?" he said as though he'd never heard of Tony.

"All right."

He was surprised, pleased, and then puzzled. He walked his beat tormented by her militant defense of Tony. She loved Tony. Maybe it's just her deep sense of loyalty, he'd think hopefully. Maybe they're just good friends. But it wouldn't jell. She loved Tony—he couldn't get away from it—and he wondered why they hadn't married.

He found an opportunity to speak to Markel. "A good thing you speak to me first," nodded Markel. "Say one word to that girl, just say, 'Tony,' and you get your eyes scratched out."

Frank winced.

"A smart girl, Helen," said Markel. "As a child she knows more than Momma, except when it comes to Tony." He sighed. "Such a nice boy he was, Carran. A doctor I thought he'd be, a lawyer maybe, and what is he?" His eyes held the parental bitterness of it. "A night clubber, a big-shot gambler."

"Still, she loves him?"

"Helen has loved Tony since they were kids." He squinted up at Frank. "Look, Carran. You come on the avenue and you do a fine job. In all my life the avenue isn't so quiet and peaceful. Why look for trouble?"

Frank ran into Tony a few days later. Tony went out of his way to make the meeting seem accidental. "Hear you've been squiring Helen Bradley about town," he said.

"You've heard right," said Frank, and added deliberately, "And I'm taking her out Saturday night."

"Nice girl, Helen," said Tony quietly. He chewed a moment, his black eyes probing Frank. "Fast company for a patrolman's dough," he smiled.

"Helen didn't ask how much I make," said Frank stiffly.

"She wouldn't. Well, any time you're short bring her over to the club. It'll be on the house."

"I pay my own way, thanks."

Tony smiled, "Any way, I'll be glad to have you."

Frank puzzled over it as he walked his beat. He'd expected an abrupt, "Hands off or else," attitude. Contempt, at least. It made a deep impression, so deep he had to fight to keep Tony's stature from doubling in size. He told himself there was a subtle purpose behind the meeting, an attempt to—

He caught himself and Helen's words came blasting. *A little mind clutching small vicious thoughts. . . .*

He stopped and stared the length of his beat. Maybe she was right, he thought uneasily. His beat was a single thought possessing him night and day. He'd concentrated on the little things, and for their sake he'd endured the criticism of the merchants and the thinly disguised ridicule of his fellow patrolmen. He remembered his feeling of triumph when the merchants began to accept him, when the sergeant no longer bothered to check on him. He'd become an integral part of the avenue.

A small part, a very small part. Was this, he thought, the inevitable fate of a small man obsessed by small thoughts?

Tony had grown out of the avenue. From a modest bar and grill on First Avenue to an expensive night club over on the West Side. Over there he mingled with wealthy and influential people who admired and respected him. A big man.

For the first time Frank's firm conviction that Tony had murdered Patsy Ciano was shaken. He wasn't sure; and if he wasn't sure of that, he wasn't sure of anything.

Frank met Helen on Saturday night and was careful not to mention Tony, even though Helen gave him a couple of obvious openings. And then he found he couldn't talk about his beat, either, and that hurt, because he wanted to talk to Helen about his work. When Helen didn't mention his job he knew she'd become equally watchful.

So they developed a routine. They embarked upon an imaginary round-the-world culinary tour. A French restaurant one week, a Swedish place the next, Hungarian, Chinese. After dinner they'd go to a movie or a night club. It was all gay and amusing, light fluffy stuff that built a wall solid as concrete between them.

Frank's gnawing uncertainty was blasted when Jock (Big Irish) Burke, a big-time gambler from Hollywood, appeared in the city. Big Irish liked a wide spread and if he remained in the city it meant trouble with Tony.

It wasn't long in coming. Items appeared in the news columns: Acting on an anonymous tip the police raided the Parkair Hotel and broke up a big poker game. Mike Walsh, seen about town with Big Irish Burke, was held for questioning. . . .

A counter item appeared: Police raid West Side garage and arrest crap shooters. Tony Longo, a friend of Tony Manero, night club owner . . .

It looked like open warfare. Frank was certain Tony would work out another Ciano murder. He'd come up with another unbreakable alibi like Father Nasche.

Weeks went by and nothing happened. The lull before the storm, he thought, and was disconcerted when Tony publicly met Big Irish in Tony's club and they made quite a thing of shaking hands while the flashlight bulbs popped.

Frank's disappointment was a double-edged weapon. It resolved his doubts about Tony being a big man and left him in the unenviable position of feeling frustrated because a murder hadn't been committed.

Then one night Helen told Frank she was going to be busy the following week. She told him in that way she had, telling him this couldn't go on. It was the way of small people. Frank stiffened. He didn't mention another week, another date. He dropped a cold, "Good-night," before her and walked out of her life.

He walked his beat with a heavy heart, remembering Lieutenant Ames' words, *Know your beat like the palm of your hand if you want to get promoted. Study men, their ways of doing business, their habits and mannerisms. . . .*

Well, he'd done just that, thought Frank, and where was his promotion? Bitterly, he thought, Ames didn't tell me that no matter what a small man does he'll stay a patrolman; he'll walk a beat until he's ready for a meager pension.

He stopped and stared resentfully at Tony's big expensive car parked just off the avenue. The window was open. Automatically he went over and looked in. A brass key gleamed dully.

Reaching in, he thought, *The little man obsessed with little things. Go on, go heckle a big man.*

He walked into Tony's office, the keys in his hand. Tony and three friends were in back, playing gin rummy.

"So I did it again," said Tony ruefully.

"I warned you." Frank dropped the keys in his pocket. "You'll get them back in a week."

"A week!" One of Tony's friends stared at Frank, incredulous. "And what's Tony going to do in the meantime?"

The second one stared at Tony. "You gonna let him get away with this, Tony?"

"What can I do?" Tony shrugged, his hands spread.

Frank returned to his beat with the feeling that there was something off-key about it, a staginess he couldn't put his finger on. He saw the man lurking in front of Markel's but he was too pre-occupied to pay much attention until the man seemed to disappear. He stiffened, the layout around Markel's flashing through his mind. A flight of steps beyond the store led down to an alley that angled around the back of the building to a flight of steps up to the side street.

He chose the side street. Moving swiftly to the steps, he took out his flashlight and gun and eased down into the darkness of the alley. He followed the alley, turned the corner of the building carefully. Shoes scraped on concrete. Matches flared, showing a man by Markel's door. He was looking expectantly up the steps to the avenue.

"Don't move," said Frank, and hit him with the light beam.

The man whirled, terror contorting his face. "Wait, I ain't done nothin'! Oh, it's you," he said, relief flooding his voice.

"Surprise," said Frank. He frisked the man, found a worn wallet. Hymie Appel. Papers with the names of horses scribbled on them. "What are you doing down here?" asked Frank.

"I was passin' by and I dropped a silver dollar down the steps—a lucky piece."

"And it rolled right through the cellar door, eh?" Frank snapped his chain bracelet around Hymie's wrist. "Let's go."

On the way up to the call box, Frank examined Hymie's pasty face, his shifty evasive eyes. Again he had the feeling that something was off-key. It gnawed at him.

He called in and asked for a radio car to pick up the prowler.

"A prowler!" exploded the sergeant. "What the hell are you messing with a prowler for?"

"What's wrong with picking up a prowler?" asked Frank.

"For almost a year you haven't bothered to make an arrest," snapped the sergeant, "and the one night something big breaks, you're out chasing prowlers!"

Frank's hand tightened around the receiver. "What happened?" he asked.

"Big Irish Burke was just shot to death in the Parkair Hotel, that's all," the sergeant sneered. "Get rid of that prowler and get down to Tony's place. Look like you got brains for once. Captain Melbourne is on the way over—and Inspector Worts is with him."

Frank snapped the receiver back on the hook. He didn't turn Hymie loose, for now he was sure Hymie was a part of it, a strand in the web that had been weaving since he found Tony's key in the car. He handcuffed the protesting Hymie to an iron railing and strode down the avenue.

I should have doubled back, he thought, passing Markel's. *As soon as I felt there was something phony about it, I should have—* He was coming up to Twelve Twenty-one. He stopped suddenly as Helen ran out of the doorway.

"Oh, Frank. Markel has had a stroke," she cried breathlessly. "Hurry, you'll know what to do."

He turned, giving to the pressure of her hand. "Did you call Doc Nason?" Before she could answer, he pulled up short, anger slashing his features. "You, too," he said.

She faced him stiffly, her cheeks flushed, her eyes bright. "The big man," he said bitterly, "big enough to get a woman to do his dirty work."

BLACK MASK

She swung with him, her hands reaching. "Please don't go, Frank. Don't—"

He caught her arms, gripped them hard. "Do you love him that much?" he said harshly. He pushed her aside and hurried on down the avenue.

He stood outside Tony's, the car keys clutched in his hand, utterly depressed by the feeling that it was too late. Too late all around.

Two big cars swerved into the avenue and rolled to a stop. Inspector Worts climbed out of the first car, Captain Melbourne out of the precinct car. Detectives piled out after them.

"Tony Manero in there?" demanded Worts.

Frank nodded. He showed them the way into Tony's office. Tony was still playing gin rummy with his three friends. They looked up, cold-faced, as the police filed in.

"Take those three outside," snapped Worts.

The detectives herded Tony's friends outside. Frank closed the door and stood with his back to it. He looked at Worts, Melbourne, the veteran detective beside them. Men who had earned promotions by constant vigilance and intelligent application of police technique.

His eyes shifted to Tony. The gambler sat relaxed, his eyes alert. He chewed a wad of gum slowly and deliberately. There was an open gum wrapper on the desk before Tony. Merely noticing it made Frank flush. Even at a time like this he lost himself in trifling details.

"All right, let's have it," barked Worts. "What's your alibi this time?"

Tony said, "I've been in here since—let's see, Officer Carran came in here about ten minutes after two and I was playing gin with the boys. Been in here ever since."

"How do you know we're interested in the past half hour?" sneered Worts.

"Oh, let's not be coy about this, Inspector," said Tony impatiently. "I was tipped off that Big Irish Burke was shot at exactly eighteen minutes after two."

"Was he in here at ten after two?" asked Worts.

"Yes, sir," said Frank, certain now that he was going to be a part of Tony's alibi. His insides tightened.

"And now it's—" Tony checked his watch—"thirty-one minutes past the hour. "Officer Carran has been standing outside

for three or four minutes. That leaves me seventeen minutes for me to get to the Parkair Hotel, shoot Big Irish and return here. I couldn't have done it unless I drove there and back, and I couldn't do that." He smiled, enjoying himself.

"Why not?" asked Worts.

"Because Officer Carran has my car keys in his pocket."

Worts whirled on Frank. "Do you have his car keys in your pocket?" he demanded heavily looking as if he couldn't believe it.

Frank swallowed. He could see the utter exasperation—in the way Worts was looking at him—of every man on the force when they heard. Now he knew how Father Nasche felt when the police questioned him.

Fury blazed in Worts' eyes. He swung back to Tony. "Doesn't mean a thing," he rasped. "You have a duplicate key."

"Sorry," Tony shook his head. "Search me and see."

A quick search showed he wasn't carrying any car key.

"So what," said Worts impatiently. "There are other cars."

"Not for me." Tony smiled mockingly. Everybody—but everybody—knows I wouldn't get into another car."

There it is, thought Frank. All it needed was a smart lawyer to turn it into a circus. He could see Tony sitting in court, as he was now, laughing inwardly, his jaws working slowly and methodically against a wad of gum.

His thoughts broke, "Just a minute," he said, stepping forward.

"Get out of here!" cried Worts angrily. "I'll talk to you later."

Frank moved doggedly over to the desk. "A fresh stick of gum, Tony?" he said, picking up the paper wrapper.

"Want one?" smiled Tony.

"Did you hear what the inspector said?" demanded Melbourne.

"Where's the old wad of gum?" asked Frank.

"You'll get yourself into trouble," warned Tony.

"I'll tell you where it is, Tony," said Frank, fending the detective off with a straight arm. "You didn't have much time, you said—seventeen minutes. "That's fast driving to the Parkair Hotel and back, no time to stop anywhere. So the wad of gum must be somewhere between your car and where you're sitting."

"So?" Tony was amused.

"So you stuck the duplicate key to the gum and then stuck the gum somewhere to hide the key."

"The key to the solution." Tony laughed mirthlessly. "Get him out of here, Inspector, before the jerk makes me hysterical."

"No," said Worts. "Go on, Carran."

Frank looked down at Tony, waited for him to speak. Tony shrugged, "Go ahead, search all you want."

"I will," said Frank grimly. "I'll go over it inch by inch."

Tony stared up at Frank, his jaw muscles bulging. "There's only one thing wrong with your theory, Carran," he said, forcing a smile. "I threw the old wad—" he bent down behind the desk—"into the waste basket."

He straightened up, a big automatic in his hand. He didn't say anything, just rested the butt of the gun on the desk, the muzzle pointed straight ahead. The policemen froze, their eyes riveted on the gun. The office was deadly silent for a full minute.

"You're one smart cop." Tony chewed slowly. His dark eyes burned. "I ought to kill you. I ought to put one right between your eyes."

"Tony." Frank moved cautiously, placed the flat of his hands on the desk and leaned on them. "Figure it, Tony," he said to the man he had observed for so long. "Use that gun and you don't get out of here alive. There's four of us in here, detectives outside." He leaned heavily on his hands, adding their physical force to his argument. "And this time, Tony, we can't afford to let you get away."

"All right," said Tony flatly. "Let's have at it."

Frank didn't go for the automatic with his hands. He said earnestly, "Tony, don't be foolish—" and as he said it, he threw himself, chest down, on the gun.

A loud, flaming roar filled the office. Frank's face crashed into the top of the desk. Blindly, he grabbed for Tony's arm. There was a violent swirl of movement; he was off the desk, falling, tangled in a blur of violent forces, falling, falling....

"Carran!"

They were lifting him to his feet, checking him over, discovering that he was all right. Tony was on the floor, moving groggily. The veteran detective had the automatic in his hand. Worts dragged Tony to his feet, slammed him back into the chair.

"Now. Where'd you hide the extra key?"

Tony ran his tongue across his lips. He couldn't chew; he'd lost the wad of gum

"Under the desk drawer," he said.

Worts exhaled. He turned to Frank. "Nice work," he said. "How long you been on the force, Carran?"

"Almost two years."

"How did you ever catch onto this gum angle?"

"Well, sir, Lieutenant Ames taught us to notice such details."

Worts grinned, "You mean *Captain Ames*." Pleased, he turned to Melbourne, "Just wait until the next time Ames complains that the boys at the academy never listened to him."

Frank went back to his beat. He walked the quiet darkness of the avenue, and it was in him, the quietness, the darkness. His victory was a dim light burning in loneliness.

He stopped outside Twelve Twenty-one. The doorway was a shadowy oblong. *A little man*, he thought, *a little man who'll never own a night club or an expensive car. I'll have to work all my life, and work hard, because I am a little man*

Frank stepped back, afraid his thoughts were tricking him. The shadows took on outline, came into movement. Helen stepped out. The next moment she was in his arms, sobbing.

"He came to me," she sobbed. "He asked me." She squirmed under the torture of it. "I had to do it, Frank. I had to!"

"It's all right, Helen," he said, holding her close. "It's all right."

He knew now why Tony had never quite measured up to her standards; he didn't realize he'd just passed the test.

He remembered Hymie. "Come on," he said.

They walked the avenue, walking through the results of Franks unceasing vigilance. They walked in peace and quiet.

Hot-Rod HOMICIDE

By DEAN EVANS

CHAPTER ONE.

THE KID AND THE CORPSE.

I WAS having a few before-supper beers in a new place that wasn't doing too much business when I turned around on the barstool, as you will do, to get a look at a girl who had come in a couple of minutes before and had taken a wall booth behind me.

I almost dropped the beer in my hand. The girl was balling her eyes straight at me and they were filled with a horror that went all the way back through the ages to the lashing fist of Cain on that first violent day in the Garden of Eden.

I yanked my own eyes away and brought them back to where they belonged. She was a young kid—not over seventeen by the looks of it. She was dressed in blue jeans and a shirt big enough for me, and she had a blue leather handbag. In front of her was a Tom Collins that hadn't been touched. I sipped my beer and wondered how I'd noticed so much about her.

Just then the front door of the place blew open and floated a large red-faced man who sat down at the very end of the bar. I looked down his way. He croaked "Bourbon," at the bartender. He seemed to be suffering from that terrible kind of sickness known as a hangover.

The barman moved down, poured and looked at a bill the red-faced gent laid down. He made change. Then he moved down to where I was and began to swipe lazily at the bar top with a damp cloth. I could feel his eyes going over the top of my head at the girl in the booth behind.

"Know the doll?" he mouthed at me. His hand still swung in little circles—a mechanical gesture he could do in his sleep

"No."

"Been studying you like a racing form."

"A little young," I ventured.

"Dunno. Hard to tell. You say something and they either slam a birth certificate in your puss and make a fool of you or else they get real nasty. Both ways they're sore and that's the last time they come in here. A place like this can't exactly afford to lose customers."

"Yeah," I said.

"Maybe she's mistaking you for somebody else."

"Maybe," I said.

"Maybe thinks you're a movie star."

"Bourbon!" croaked the drunk again.

The barman shrugged and moved down to pour. I watched idly. On the top of the drunk's head was a patch of skin where hair should be. I couldn't see his features for he was hunched pretty far over. I didn't care. He didn't look like much of a playmate anyway.

The drunk, the girl and me. Aside from us the place was empty. I sighed, finished my beer and got down off the barstool.

I couldn't help looking at her on the way out. The horror was still there. I stopped in my tracks, leaned over her booth and said:

"The barman figured a movie hero, miss, but that couldn't be. I'm not nearly that pretty."

"Dust unto dust," she said.

"Huh?"

I gawked at her. She was sitting like a telephone pole, straight up and down, and her hands beneath the table were jamming the blue handbag into her stomach. Her eyes looked ready to explode. She hadn't touched the Tom Collins.

Then she spoke again:

"In his hot-rod. Behind you car. Harold Harris."

"Little girl," I said. "How would you like me to give you a punch right in the nose?"

Her breath suddenly stopped, and she just sat there looking not any more par-



Lightning-Paced Detective Novelette



*Because murder in a souped-up buggy spelled tragedy
for a sweet little chick, Private-eye Johnny Branes
jumped into the fray—feet before brains.*

alyzed than a plaster wall. But something was happening to her eyes. They were rolling to one side, rolling back, rolling over again. I recognized what it was: in a half minute she was going to be hysterical.

I picked up the collins and jammed it against her teeth and said, "Drink it! Go on, dammit, drink!"

It snapped her out of it. The eyes stopped rolling, turned my way and latched onto my own.

"Oooh golly," she moaned.

I don't know to this minute why I decided as I did. But I said:

"I'll be right back. Don't move, don't think, don't scream. I'll be right back." I went out the swinging door. I turned left, went along the side of the building, and turned left again around the corner of East Eighth Street.

And there it was like she had said it would be. Parked directly behind my own old sedan was a cut-down job known hereabouts as a hot-rod. I turned the door handle, pulled the door open, and looked in.

He seemed about eighteen or nineteen, and he was crumpled down in the passenger side of a very small leather seat. He didn't turn his head to look at me. He had pimply skin and sandy slicked-back hair that began so evenly across his forehead it might have been hinged there. His wide eyes were closed. His narrow lips were open. Between the lips a few upper teeth showed white and dry. I reached in a hand and learned what death feels like under your fingertips.

He had been shot about in the middle of his chest. There was no blood on his shirt. No blood showed on his sports coat. A heart shot. Somebody had been pretty good.

I closed the door and went back around the corner. The barman was being busy wiping up the spot at the bar where the bald-headed drunk had been. The drunk had gone. I went down to the booth and said to the girl:

"Drink your drink. I found the car."

I waited. She was crying softly now.

"He's dead," I said gently. "And the police have to be told. Is that his car?"

I looked up at the bar. The barman had gone up front by the windows. "No one can see," I said. "And I don't mind." I let her cry. "You two kids in school together?"

I waited again. There didn't seem much else to say. Somebody had shot the kid in the hot-rod—it seemed that uncomplicated to me.

Suddenly she put the hanky down and whispered: "He was waiting for me out in the school parking lot. I was late. I found him like that behind the wheel."

"Oh," I said. "But he isn't behind the wheel now."

"No, he isn't. I pushed him over on the seat and drove to a drugstore and looked up private detectives in the phone books. I picked out your name and then I drove downtown to your office."

"Huh?" I gawked for the second time. "You did, eh? What's my name?"

"Johnny Branes."

"Uh huh," I said. "And then what?"

"I saw you just as you got into the elevator on your floor. When I went to your office and it was empty, I thought it must have been you, so I went downstairs again and you were just driving away. I followed you."

"Little girl," I said, marveling, "you fascinate me. With a dead boy sitting next to you, you drive that crowded little crate downtown in heavy traffic, passing cops on every corner. Then you park—on a busy street—and go upstairs in my office building. Then you come down again, get back in the car and follow me over here. Is that what happened?"

I stared. If she was a day over seventeen I was a baboon. "Why me?" I asked. "Why not the police?"

"Because I couldn't! It's been forbidden and Harold was all the time doing it and I was afraid. . . ."

"What's been forbidden?"

"Red-out."

"Huh?"

She nodded, pulled the blue hanky up to her eyes once more. "I told him not to!" she wailed. "And now look!"

"Yes," I said. "Now look!"

"It—it killed him!"

This girl was giving me surprises for fair. I said slowly, carefully:

"Little girl, listen. Maybe you've got a new name for it. I'm not much up on your crowd. But where I come from I wouldn't say this red-out had killed him."

"Wh-what?"

"Somebody shot him," I said bluntly.

I should have known better than give it to her like that. A body can stand just so much, and she had already had the limit. Her eyes blinked once; the hanky fluttered once. And then she flopped across the table in a dead faint.

The barman took care of her. She wasn't a lot of fuss. I went to the phone booth in the corner and called Captain Martin at Homicide.

After that I thought I had better keep an eye on the hot-rod until Martin got there. I don't know exactly why I thought that; it just seemed like a good idea at the time. I went outside.

From twenty feet away—even in the gathering dusk—I could see his bald patch gleaming. I stopped dead and watched. It was the bourbon-croaking lad and he was bent over, leaning slightly in the open door of the little hot-rod. He seemed very interested in something. Too interested.

I yelled, "Hey!"

He slammed the little coupe door, and took off like a startled gazelle. He ran across the street to a big sedan that was parked there. He dove in, got the big heap started and slid away like a shadow up the street and around the corner. His car didn't have any license plate.

For a drunken man he had been smooth, swift, sure. He'd been a dream, he had. For a drunken man he'd been fine. Only he wasn't drunk at all. I gaped at the spot where his car had melted around the corner.

And then—and I was glad of it—came Homicide. Captain Martin himself got out of the prowler car.

"Okay, Branes," he said. "Where is it?"

I pointed at the little hot-rod. Just then I didn't feel like saying anything. The bald red-faced guy had put on a drunk act in the saloon but I didn't know why. I also

didn't know why he'd be interested in the contents of the little car.

Captain Martin put two men on the coupe and then he looked at me. I said, "Inside." I took him into the saloon and down to the booth.

"All right," he said. "You give it first."

I told him, not leaving out the drunk who wasn't drunk. And all the time I was talking he was studying the girl in the booth, his eyes large cameras that didn't miss a feature from her feet to her scared eyes. When I finished he went to the phone and called Headquarters and after that he took the girl.

He dragged out parts of it in chunks. They all do that, the Homicide men. They can't help it. Death is an impersonal commodity to them—the payroll only.

I felt sorry for the girl. What she had done had taken real nerve—whether it was right or wrong didn't matter. Her name was Janie Barron and she was just fifteen. The dead youth's name was Harold Harris. He was twenty.

After a while the police truck got there. Just as they were towing the hot-rod away, newsmen from the two morning sheets showed up. They took pictures. Martin let them take him sitting in the booth looking businesslike.

After that he said to me: "Okay, Branes. Powder off. Be over at Headquarters in a couple hours and sign a statement."

"All right, Martin," I said. I looked at the girl. Her eyes were dry but the horror was coming back again. Fifteen years should never know things like this. She cried out:

"Please help me, Mr. Branes!"

I pulled my eyes away. "What's with the girl, Captain?" I asked.

"What's with the girl?" His eyebrows went up. "Just what do you think's with the girl? She's going in on suspicion, that's what. Now get the hell out of here."

"All right," I said. It was a pity. She was so damned young.

CHAPTER TWO.

BALD AND BELLIGERENT.

I WENT out and ate supper. After that I drove over on the west side and looked up the address she'd given: 1875 Palm Avenue.

The street was quiet. Short, ornamental palms lined both sides, their fronds hanging down almost to shoulder height. It was a

desert-type house, set well back on a strip of lawn neat enough for bowling. It had a picture window in front and I could see dim soft lights inside. And cheery walls and comfortable furniture. It looked like a respectable place where a respectable girl would live with respectable parents. I turned around and drove back downtown to Headquarters and signed Martin's four copies for him.

"She talk, Captain?" I asked.

"Yeah, Branes, she talked. She stabbed her lover with a porkchop because he wouldn't let her play red-out with him. Any more police business you'd like to know?"

"A little," I said. "What is this red-out business?"

He snorted. "Is this something you actually don't know about?"

"It is," I admitted.

"Well! Nice to hear you say it, Branes. Damned nice. Red-out is a nasty little game the high school kids invented. They take a deep breath and then they hold their noses and their mouths shut tight, and they blow against the inside of their cheeks. It makes everything go red before they pass out. Thrills, they're after."

"Migosh!" I yelled.

"And in their dreams they see snakes and animals and such. Grand game, red-out. Fine little pastime. They even shoot each other over it."

"You're kidding!"

"I am, am I? Go on home, private dick. I've got a job to do."

I shook my head at him and went out of his office. It was a damned shame, that's what it was.

I was thinking this and feeling lousy about it as I walked down the street to my old sedan. That's why I didn't see the passenger I had sitting inside. I wasn't aware of him until I opened the door on the driver's side and got in and heard his husky voice.

"C'mon in quiet-like, guy. No fuss. That's it. Now close the door and we'll go for a spin."

The .25 he was jamming in my ribs was a small thing as guns go. I looked down at it. I shut the door, started the car and pulled away from the curb.

"That's the boy," he said. His bald spot gleamed in the reflected light from the low-hanging street lamps as we passed each one. I wondered a little about where his car was.

"What the cops have to say about it?" he husked.

I said, "Huh?"

"Don't gimme that, pal. I ain't in the mood. They tumble yet?"

"Tumble?"

The gun made my side ache the way he rammed it into me. He grunted fiercely: "None of that! What'd they tell you? What you tell them?"

"I didn't tell them anything. I didn't know anything."

"Uh huh. That figgers. And what they tell you?"

"They told me she stabbed the boy with a porkchop."

He chuckled. "Yeah. Cops're like that, ain't they? Don't like you private eyes, huh? They find anything in the heap?"

"You know what they found," I told him.

"I don't mean that, pal. I mean they find anything else."

"I don't know," I said.

"Oke. Now for the big one. You find anything else when you snuck a look before the cops come?"

"No," I said.

"No, huh? Well, we'll see. I figger the cops didn't. If they hadda, things would be a little different. Federals, I mean. Get me?"

"Sure," I said.

"You do, hah?"

"If I said I didn't you'd gouge me with that little gun."

He chuckled again softly to himself. It sounded like sometime, somewhere in the dim distant past, he must have been beaten across the throat with a lead pipe. His words came out with festoons hanging to them.

"Turn around, pal," he ordered. "I'm tired ridin'."

I did. We drove back toward the center of town.

"Same place as before," he said.

I obeyed. And as we drew up before Headquarters again I saw his car. It was standing directly in front in a no-parking zone, and still didn't have any license plates.

He grunted: "Them cops! Lookit me parked right in front of the joint, illegal like. I'll mebbe get me a ticket out of it. Fun, huh? Okay, now pull up to the curb here."

I stopped about a hundred feet in front of his car.

"Night, pal," he husked. He began to bring up the .25 butt foremost. He was chuckling. I kept my eyes on the gun, wondering if when it began its downward sweep I'd have time enough to grab before it hit.

He fooled me. Suddenly, like the flick of a whip, his other hand came up from his side, and in it was the nastiest sap I'd ever seen out of the corner of one eye. I didn't even get a chance to look squarely at it—much less grab it.

The street lights went out with a snap and I began to slide down a long dark funnel to a patch of nothingness at the other end. A chordle that sounded like two waffle irons rubbing together accompanied me all the way down.

When I came out of it, my head was jammed against the brake pedal and I had a headache that went all the way down to the nails in my shoes. The street lights were all on strong and they were shooting bright rays of hot flame into my eye sockets. My mouth felt like the bottom of an ash tray and there was blood on my forehead.

I pushed the seat cushion off my stomach and jimmied my arm up to where I could reach the door latch. After that I didn't have any trouble falling out of the car.

I made the six granite steps of Headquarters and fell inside the door and into the arms of the drinking fountain in the hall.

"Martin!" I moaned. And that's all I knew until I opened my eyes again, and there I was in Martin's office, propped in a chair. We were alone, and Martin was staring curiously at me.

"Holy Mackerel! What the hell hit you?"

"A sap," I said thickly. "Right out in front of Police Headquarters. A dandy force we've got, Martin. Just dandy."

"What?"

"The baldheaded drunk. He got me when I went out to my car. Made me drive him around, then drive him back here. Then he knocked me out, tore up the inside of my head and left me. Right out in front. A dandy force we've got."

He said, "What?"

"He wondered if the Federals were in on the case yet."

Martin jerked. He jumped up, tore a first-aid case out of a wall container and brought it over. He said quickly:

"Take it easy, boy. You're okay. Just sit still while I put a little merthiolate on it. A little cut on the noggin' is all. Federals, you said? What else he say, boy?"

"Wanted to know what I told you, what you told me. He was a little amused to learn the girl stabbed the kid with a pork-chop."

Martin stood back, looking at my forehead. He wanted to pretend, but it wasn't doing him any good. His tongue was flicking across his lips nervously. I wondered why.

"He wanted to know what you found in the hot-rod besides the body," I said.

"Yeah, boy?" An agonized look came into Martin's eyes. "And what you tell him?"

I stared at him, fascinated. I didn't have the slightest idea what he was driving at, but something told me to play it up. I said softly, insinuatingly: "What would you have wanted me to tell him, Martin? What would have pleased you?"

Somehow I had him backed against a wall and didn't know how I was doing it. Little beads of sweat were beginning to form on his brow. He gulped.

"You—you touch the body before I got there tonight?"

I took a deep breath and dove in feet first. "Yeah," I said levelly. "I touched it."

"I thought so. Now look, boy. About those marijuana sticks, I—I wouldn't figure they were important, I—" "

"Marijuana sticks?"

He didn't answer. I watched him in surprise, waiting. He didn't answer at all. His nervousness began to fade and his eyes became small and crafty. I blinked at him and waited.

"You bungling liar!" he whispered.

I'd said something wrong. I stammered—and it didn't do me any good at all: "You found marijuana on the kid, didn't you, Martin? And you're shaking about it. What's the gag?"

But by that time he was up in the next county ahead of me. He took out a cigarette, lit it and blew smoke in my face. "Marijuana? What marijuana, Branes? All we found in the car was a rumpled sales contract from the Crispin Used Car lot. A blank. The kid probably bought the hot-rod there." He was grinning. If ever I saw larceny that grin was it.

I shrugged wearily. "Okay, Martin, I can lose as good as anybody. But just for laughs what's this marijuana business? I deserve that much. I got beat up bad, remember."

And that got me a bundle of nothing. He pulled the cigarette from his lips and snarled: "Get the hell out of here!"

So that was that. I staggered out, went

on home, put my sedan away and walked through the silent and darkened lobby of my apartment to the elevator. The night kid who runs it was reading a hardboiled detective story and didn't bother to look up.

"Your cousin blew into town, dick. I let him in with my pass key."

I was too tired for games. I shook my head at him and said, "I'll laugh tomorrow, kid. That okay?"

"No kiddin', dick. Your cousin from Phoenix. Remember? Big bald guy."

It was suddenly too much. I clamped my lips tight and got out of the elevator at my door, walked down the hall to the door, keyed it open. I looked in warily. If an earthquake had hit my little living room, it wouldn't have done anything worse. I steadied myself against the door jamb and looked back. The kid was still peering after me.

"Ain't he there, dick?"

"He ain't," I said.

I don't know what Baldy had expected to find. A potted poinsettia that went along with the furnishings was tipped over on the rug—knocked that way by a flung davenport cushion. I righted it. The davenport itself had been given the razor blade treatment. Two desk drawers were on the floor. The bed had been partially let down out of the wall. I stared at the spilling guts of the mattress.

I went into the kitchenette and listened to the Frigidaire running. It was defrosting at the same time. I slammed the door shut. I went into the bathroom. The top was off the toilet tank and lay in two pieces on the floor.

My wrecked apartment made it my business now. I went back into the living room and phoned Homicide and asked for Martin. I told him about the elevator kid and about my cousin from Phoenix who drove a big car. I described my wrecked apartment.

He gave me a grunt for all of it. "So what, Branes? What's that got to do with Homicide? So a bald-headed mug doesn't like your insides. So he combs your joint with a sledge. So what? This is Homicide Division, or did you forget?"

"Like that, eh, Captain?" I said slowly. "What about him sneaking a look at the hot-rod like I told you?"

He gave me another grunt. "Look, limp-head, this guy is something out of your

past. Get it? Maybe something from a couple cases ago. You private dicks gimme a pain." He hung up and left me staring at the davenport with a dead phone in my hand.

The sunrise editions of the papers carried it but not big. No pics. Not even front page. It had been hushed. There had been a killing in a car in a parking lot behind the junior college that had to do with teen-age jealousy and a forbidden practice called "red-out." One student was being held on suspicion, and the police were investigating further. And that was all.

After breakfast I looked up the Crispin Used Car lot. It was the usual blossom but a bit smaller than the normal, squeezed between two other places on Hidalgo near Sixth Street West.

It had a tiny shack in the rear surrounded by several used cars of various models. In a drive that ran the length of the lot was a truck attached to one of those interstate trailers that carry cars. They were getting ready to ship. The trailer had five cars on it, two on the upper deck, three below.

I put my hand on the headlight of a big Cadillac and studied the trailer. There was something odd about it. None of the cars being shipped were newer than 1934.

Somebody said abruptly in my ear: "Like the Caddy?"

I turned. He looked like a salesman. He had a full head of blond hair and his face was waxed. He was wearing a red corduroy shirt and tan gabardine trousers held up by silver colored suspenders. His shoes looked like they would run a little under forty dollars. I said:

"Where did you come from?"

A smile crept along the mustache. "Like the sedan? Owned by a retired schoolteacher who dropped dead waiting for delivery. Take a look at it."

"Uh huh," I said. "How much trade-in on my old heap across the street there? Nice shape. Built before the war."

The mustache looked bored. "The first war? I don't believe—"

"It's a 1938," I said. "Got any hot-rods?"

"Uh—no. Those things are custom jobs mostly. Not much on the market. Now about this—"

"Nice cars up on the trailer," I said.

The mustache twitched. "Yes? They're already sold. We sometimes ship to areas

where the market's a little tight. Now about—"

"I like that old .32 Graham Blue Streak up on top the trailer," I said. "Just broken in nice."

The mustache twitched. "Funny man."

"You're funny, too. Shipping such old jalopies. Give you three hundred for the old Graham."

"I told you those cars were already sold."

"Seven-fifty," I said, watching the mustache.

"Now look—"

"Nine hundred. And your mustache is melting."

He stared at me for a second and then jerked a thumb. "In the office."

I followed him back to the shack. He went behind a desk in the corner and sat down, his eyes studying me without expression. Then he slowly drew open the center drawer and reached in his right hand. What he brought up gave me heartburn.

He was holding a .22 target revolver and it was aimed at where my middle vest button would be if I had on a vest.

"Say something, funny boy," he said coldly.

CHAPTER THREE.

SIT TIGHT, JOHNNY.

I DIDN'T exactly petrify but there have been times when I've felt better. I looked at the gun. The hand holding it was shaking slightly.

"Say something quick before I blow the top off your head," he rapped out.

I said slowly, carefully: "Okay, killer."

His hand jerked. "Start talking. You come in here loaded with wisecracks. That could mean a stick-up. Tell me I'm wrong!"

"All right," I said. "Yesterday a boy got shot dead in his hot-rod behind the junior college. The police said it was a jealousy killing among teen-agers. It's going to be hushed up."

"You surprise me. Do it again."

"They found marijuana sticks on the dead boy and they're ignoring it."

The mustache crouched. "You're not the police. What's your angle?"

I said carefully: "I'm an innocent by-

stander. A private eye. I was in the saloon when they got the girl they're holding for the murder. Later a bald-headed guy questioned me about it and sapped me in my own car. When I got home I found he'd wrecked my apartment, looking for something. My angle is to get him and squeeze out some money for the wrecked apartment."

"That your only angle?" The gun crept toward me. I could have taken it and tucked it in my pocket without more than moving a wrist.

I said, "Yeah." I didn't let go of his eyes. My right hand swooped around in a short arc and got the .22 by the barrel and twisted. His fingers flopped off and there I was standing with a target revolver in my hand and the thing pointed the wrong way.

It surprised me almost as much as it did him. I looked down at it and reversed it in my hand.

"Now you talk a little," I said.

His mustache needed attention. He lifted a fingernail and touched it. His eyes were blinking slowly.

I said, "One of your sales contracts was found in the dead kid's car. And you don't handle hot-rods."

"I—I believe I see what you mean." His lips clamped shut. I waited. "I have a partner," he finally said.

"Yeah? Now we're moving. Let's hear lots about the partner."

"A few months ago when business started to drop off I took in a sort of financial helper. I needed the money. I didn't know much about him, but he was loaded and that was fine with me. He rents half the lot. Those are his junkers on the trailer out there. He ships them back East somewhere."

"I couldn't hang anybody with that," I said.

He reached down slowly, keeping his eyes on the gun, and brought up from the center drawer on the desk something that made me blink.

"My partner smokes these things," he said.

It was marijuana. I've seen enough of them to know. I stared at it a long time.

"This partner drive a big sedan? No license plates?"

"Since two days ago. He took it in. Out-of-state-car. That's why no plates yet." The mustache began to twitch violently. I

watched it. "He's rather large, Red face. Bald spot on top of his head."

There were only two more things I needed. "Where does he live, and what is his name?" I asked.

"West Hidalgo Apartments. His name is Joseph Graz."

I watched the mustache unwind its nerves. It settled peacefully, gracefully, into the contour its barber had made for it. "You understand, I had no knowledge of—I mean—"

"I understand," I said. "You mean you're selling your partner down the river to save your own hide. Well, he deserves it at that. Here's your gun. And be careful of it. It might go off."

I left him in the shack and crunched along the gravel of the lot out to my crock across the street.

This thing was still a police matter but I had been sapped and my place wrecked, and the police didn't care. Moreover—and more important—a young girl with plenty of stuff behind her was still in the can and likely to be smeared with a stain a whole lifetime could never remove. And the police still didn't care.

I went over to headquarters. Martin was rustling some papers on his desk and he looked up at me as if I were an insect.

I said: "Captain, you're making a mistake."

He sneered. "Yeah? Is Branes usin' what he thinks is brains when it ain't brains at all?"

"That's funny," I said patiently. "I've been laughing at stuff like that ever since I was a kid, Captain. And you're still making a mistake."

"Suppose you tell me how, private dick? At the same time consider how easy it is to lose your license."

"I realize that," I said. "Only there's one thing. A young girl who obviously deserves nothing of the kind is being held on suspicion. I thought maybe it hadn't occurred to you."

"You're outa date, Branes," he growled.

"It doesn't mean anything more than that?"

"Cut the preachin'. The kid was released an hour ago. We haven't got the murder gun and we haven't anything else to go on. The kid's clean. We even give the dead kid's mother back the hot-rod. It's over. Done with."

"Oh," I said. "I didn't know."

"There's a lot you don't know." His eyes got to be quick tight slits and he dropped his voice meaningfully: "It's done with, Branes. Did you hear that?"

"Sure, Captain. Except for getting the murderer, you mean. I can give you a lead on that. Try a man named Joseph Graz. The bald-headed guy. Lives in the West Hidalgo Apartments."

"Thanks. Now was there anything else or can I go out and eat lunch like the rest of the public servants?"

It wasn't any use. I walked out of his office. I ate lunch, picked up a noon edition and took it up to my office to read about it and talk the thing over with myself.

It was on the back page now. The girl had been released on insufficient evidence. No murder weapon had as yet been found. The police were still investigating.

Well, it didn't taste too bad. Captain Martin had sunk it—why, I didn't know—but it wasn't too bad. There was more, so I read on:

Schools Superintendent Mrs. Elizabeth Martin (wife of Captain Frederick Martin of Homicide Division) announced Miss Janie Barron, the girl questioned by police, was to be expelled from Junior College. No further details were released to the press.

I sucked in my breath and stared at it and pictured a panic-stricken girl in a booth in a saloon laying the thing in my lap and begging me to help her. I knew now why Martin wanted it hushed. Marijuana looks a little odd on a school curriculum—especially when it's your own wife who has the job of running the schools.

I looked up the office and drove over on Hidalgo to the West Hidalgo Apartments.

It wasn't a fancy place. If you were going through town and didn't have time to look up a good hotel you might try it for a night. I went through glass doors that swung inward.

The starving lobby was deserted. So was the desk. There was a mail rack on the wall behind the desk and I leaned over and began to read names. Joseph Graz was in Room 13. I took the stairs on the left of the elevator.

I didn't exactly know what I was going to do next, but I rapped on the door and waited.

I knuckled it again and waited some more. I wasn't shaking. The .38 I held in my right hand was a comfort. Nothing hap-

pened so I touched the door-knob. It went around all the way and I stepped in.

It was just a room. A bed. A dresser. An easy chair too many people had sat in, drinking and spilling too many beers. A carpet on the floor. And Mr. Joseph Graz, my bald-headed acquaintance, on his back on the carpet, on his way up to heaven—or somewhere.

My hands began to itch. I put the .38 away and closed the door and keyed it from the inside. Then I went back to the carpet. It had got him somewhere in the middle and it had been messy. His flesh was warm. The watch on his wrist still ticked. And the gun in his hand looked as though it had just stopped smoking.

The room had a connecting bath. I looked in. The usual a man carries: razor, lotion, hair tonic. This was his room, all right. I took the dresser next. Shirts, shorts, ties. There didn't seem to be much. In the small top drawer I found a sap—probably the one he'd used on me last night. I went back to him. His wallet was still with him and it hadn't been touched. He was carrying fifty-two dollars to d'lard.

There didn't seem to be much sense in what I was doing. I took out my handkerchief and carefully wiped everything I had touched. I unlocked the door, wiped the knob, closed it behind me. I wiped the outside knob.

I drove way over to the outskirts of town to the place where the kid who'd been shot in his hot-rod had lived.

It had been home to him, I suppose. If there had been tracks down through the center of town this would have been on the wrong side. The place had false blinds on the front windows and somebody had thought enough to paint these, but the rest of the front was peeling. I got out of the car and went up a cracked cement walk to a near-white door and punched an old-fashioned bell button.

The woman who opened the door was well on the back-yard side of forty. She had grayish wisps of hair that strayed down the sides of her face, and faded blue eyes that looked tired of what they'd been seeing for so very very long. Her nose was reddish and she'd had gin either with or for lunch.

"Yeah?" Her voice was sharp.

"I'm John Branes," I said. "A private detective. You're Mrs. Harris?"

"I'm the widow Harris. If it's on account of the kid, he was my stepson. C'mon in."

She shuffled before me on loose slippers, and took me into a room that when the house was first built had been known as a parlor. It was still a parlor. A bird-cage in one corner hung empty and unclean. The whole room was covered with soiled doilies, bric-a-brac, leaning furniture and dust.

The woman watched my eyes. She sniffed.

"Harold was a good kid in a way but he was wild. Killed Dickie one night. No reason, just killed him. Branes, you say your handle is?"

"Yes. Who is Dickie and who killed him?"

"The kid. Dickie was the canary. A comfort, canaries. You ain't connected with the pol—" A spasmodic quivering that began around her eyes wracked her wrinkled cheeks for an instant and then she blasted out a sneeze.

"Damn this cold!" she muttered. "Ain't the police, you say?"

"No."

"Uh huh. Scuse me." She shuffled away through a bead-hung arch to a dim room beyond, and then through another door. Faintly I could hear a glass and a bottle clinking together, and then the bottle being put down. When she returned she was wiping her lips and the gin smell was enough to rock the walls.

She stared blearily at me. "What's your racket, Branes? The police didn't say anything about you."

"No racket," I said. "And they wouldn't. It's too bad about your stepson."

"Yeah," she muttered. "But look at me. I married his father and six months later he dies with the d.t.'s and there I am saddled with a kid that ain't even mine. And now I got another funeral bill. Only thing I get out of it is that damned car of his." She suddenly stopped and blinked and gawked at me. "Oh! That what you come for? You interested in buying the heap?"

I turned from her gin breath. "You wouldn't know how he happened to have an expensive hot-rod like that, would you?" I asked.

"Sure. He earned it bus-boyin' down at the Golden Peacock, nights."

It seemed a little thin. I said: "The Golden Peacock is a fancy place, Mrs. Harris. It's a strip spot where a bottle of beer costs five bucks and a ham sandwich the price of a new Cadillac. But a busboy is a busboy in hell or Hoboken. So doesn't it seem a little odd?"

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SEND TO-DAY FOR COMPLETE LIST

A cough racked her suddenly, and her eyes streamed. When she got her breath she exclaimed: "How the hell do I know? Maybe the car didn't cost much. Wasn't very big. Never took me for a ride, the kid didn't. Not even once."

I stared and she stared.

"Well!" she demanded. "You gonna look at it or not?"

"Of course," I said. I turned toward the doorway, away from the dust and neglect of the room. "Is it out back?"

"Yeah. In the garage. An' you better make a decent offer. Guy ahead of you looked at it offered peanuts. A hundred bucks, he says. Tie that, mister! All them dealers is gyps!"

My feet stopped all by themselves. I turned around again and looked at the woman. "Dealer?" I asked. "A car dealer, you mean?"

"Yeah. Crispin's Car Lot." She sneered. "I give him a laugh."

I thought about that going down the cracked cement drive around to a dilapidated garage in the rear. The garage door hung open. You could'n have closed it without a hoist. The little hot-rod lay in between two rotting wooden walls. Above, the roof had partly caved and the sky shone through.

It looked the same as it had the night before I turned the door handle, but even before I looked in I was quite sure what I'd find.

The inside was a shambles. The seat cushion lay, a ribboned mess of leather strips slashed from end to end. The side walls had been treated the same. The leather covering of the ceiling hung in ruins. The floorboards were yanked up.

I stood back and looked the thing over from bumper to bumper and wondered if he had found what he was looking for.

The car was as sleek as a seal in a tank. I stared down at the shiny chromium hubcaps.

I pulled my eyes away from them and stared up through the hole in the roof of the rotting garage. Then I looked back at the hubcaps, not quite willing to believe what I was thinking.

I took out my .38 and bent down over the rear wheel. I got the front sight of the gun wedged under the lip of the hubcap and pried. It wasn't a nice thing to do to a gun, but this was suddenly very very important.

It came off with a snapping sound and lay upside down in my hand, and I took a deep breath and felt the skin on my hand begin to itch. Packed inside the hollow cap was a package done up in a sales contract from the Crispin Car lot. I poked at the package.

Heroin.

After that I tried the other wheels. The little hot-rod as it stood was worth a million dollars. All four hubcaps were loaded.

I snapped the hubcaps back on, leaving the packages intact except for the right front. That one I stuck in my breast pocket. I went back to the house, back to the dead and dusty parlor, back to the empty canary cage and the woman.

"Five hundred dollars," I said.

Her eyes spread. "Well! That ain't so bad, but I dunno. Seems like I oughta get more than that. The kid must've paid—"

"Cash," I said, taking out a checkbook.

"I dunno." Her face began to work. "A body'd have to think it over. Five hundred don't seem so much these days. Besides, I don't know whether I got any right or not—"

"All right," I said. I started to put the checkbook away.

It almost killed her. She screamed: "All right, dammit, all right! Rob a poor widow, go ahead." Her nose wrinkled. "A poor sick widow," she added.

I wrote out a check and handed it to her. "The registration," I said. "And the keys."

She gave them to me and I went back to the garage and stamped the floorboards down and crawled inside and started the thing and backed out of the drive. There was power here. My old bus in her best days never knew such power. I waved a finger at my coupe by the curb. Later I'd have to come back and get it, poor thing.

I drove downtown to a public garage and paid storage on the hot-rod for one night. Then I took a bus back to my apartment and called Captain Martin.

"Captain," I said. "I've got a hundred thousand dollars worth of heroin here in my apartment and it ties in with that killing."

I could hear him gasp. Then: "Now look, Branes—"

"You look," I said. "In one half hour it goes to the FBI, and let the chips fall where they may. Superintendent of Schools be damned."

"Now look!" There was frenzy reaching me. "Branes, you still there?"

"Still here," I said.

"Yeah, boy. Now you just hold it, I'll be right over. No need for hurry. You sit tight and I'm right with you."

CHAPTER FOUR.

HOLD-OUT.

I HUNG up. I went out in the kitchenette and took a bourbon bottle off the shelf and drank a stiff one. I looked out the window over the sink. A walnut tree, bare and ugly, stirred in a breeze. The sun was shining but it looked bleak.

It didn't take Martin long. He came in fast, gave the place a fast look.

"We alone?"

"We are," I said.

"Good. Where's the stuff, boy?"

"Sit down," I said. I lit a cigarette and waited for him. "An angle," I said slowly. "One you should have been more careful of, Martin. There's a man with a mustache and a used car lot and a marijuana and heroin business." I stopped and watched Martin flick a nervous tongue across his lips.

"He gets together old cars—junkers. Ships them out of state on trailers. It looks legit except the cars have secret nasty cargoes the law doesn't know about. Heroin and marijuana.

"He had a couple of local helpers. One was a bald-headed hard boy named Joseph Graz and the other a junior college kid named Harold Harris. The kid worked as a busboy in the Golden Peacock—a night spot. He probably passed marijuana sticks there, maybe as a connection, maybe as a direct outlet to customers. The kid made enough at it to buy the hot-rod. I don't exactly know what the bald-headed one did, but that's immaterial and we can't question him. He's dead."

Martin's mouth was dropping open. Before he could speak I went on:

"The kid got an idea. He swiped a load of heroin due for shipping on a trailer that's still waiting. But the idea wasn't so good in the long run because Crispin—the guy with the mustache and the used car lot—sent Graz after him. Graz got the kid but that's all he did get. The kid had hidden the stuff on the hot-rod in a place where Graz didn't think of looking."

"Where?" Martin croaked the word.

"Behind the hubcaps," I said. I took the small package of heroin out of my pocket

and laid it on the davenport in front of Martin. "That's why he wanted to know if the Federals were in on it yet," I said.

Martin nodded. He pawed at his lips and said to me: "You're clever, boy. That all there is to it?"

"Not quite," I said. "This morning I went to see Crispin. He thinks pretty fast, and something I've said scared him. He figured the bald-headed guy must have given the show away. But he's smart. He got himself set for an out by pretending to pull a gun on me and then letting me take it away from him. He gave me a little dance about Graz renting part of the used car lot. After I'd gone he went after Graz himself. You'll find the body in Room 13 of the West Hidalgo Apartments. It looks like suicide, only there probably won't be any powder burns on him. I think the gun is the one that killed the dead youth."

Martin picked up the small package and felt of the stuff. He was still nodding and smiling a little to himself. He said, "Yeah," slowly twice. He said:

"You're clever, Branes. My, but you're clever!"

"A little," I said.

"Yeah. Only, damn it, clever guys don't live very long!"

His right fist came around fast. I tried to duck, but I hadn't been set. It smacked against the side of my head and knocked me to my knees.

The inside of my mouth hurt and felt hot and wet. I shook my head and got to my feet and didn't even try to say anything.

His fist came around again. "Hit me back, Branes! I ain't wearing a uniform. Go on, try it."

I couldn't get under it quickly enough and I went down once more and the walls began to swim.

He slid his service revolver neatly into his right palm and grinned down evilly at me.

"You're making another mistake, Martin," I said.

"I am, eh? Tell me how, clever boy. It looks fine from here."

"Each one of the hubcaps is loaded with heroin. I didn't tell you that."

"Thanks," he said, leering. "I'll go after it—later." He reached down with one hand and grabbed my lapels and raked my forehead with the front sight on the gun. I went flat on my back and things blurred. I could hear my voice muttering weakly:

"You won't find the car. I hid it, Martin." I passed out.

When I came to, Martin was glaring down at me and grunting between slaps at my face with the flat of his hand. "Where is it?" he was demanding. "Where is it, you yellow louse!"

I tried to shake the dizziness from my eyes. "My way only, Martin," I muttered thickly. "My way only."

He knocked me out again.

When I came to for the second time and lifted my head to look around, I saw Martin sitting on the ripped davenport. He was running his fingers through his hair and chewing on his lower lip. The gun was back in his holster and he looked worried.

I got to my feet and went to the kitchenette and took a stiff one from the bourbon bottle. Then I went back and looked down at him.

"My way, only, Martin," I said. "Are you quite ready now?"

He didn't answer that. I studied him for a long time before I finally went over to the telephone stand in the corner and dialed a number.

I got the mustache at once. It sounded bored.

I said: "I found a package of heroin, Crispin. I thought I'd better let you know."

I could picture his mustache twitching violently on the other end. His voice came back fast and urgent:

"Where are you? We'd better talk this over."

"Yeah," I said. "The Potter. Figueroa North. Apartment nine." I hung up and looked over at Martin.

"We won't have long to wait," I said. "You'll hide in the bathroom. This is the guy who ordered the killing of the kid, and this is the guy who shot Joseph Graz. You're going to take him, Martin. And you're going to keep remembering I'm the only one who knows where that hot-rod is."

He got up off the davenport and didn't look at me. He moved over to the bathroom door. He went in. I went out to the kitchenette and had some more bourbon and looked again out the window over the sink at the walnut tree in the distance and at the bleak sun outside. And then I went back to the living room and sat down on the wrecked davenport and waited.

When the buzzer sounded I got up, went over to the door and opened it, and looked squarely at the mustache on his upper lip.

"Come in, Crispin," I said. "Don't mind the place. I haven't done any cleaning

today." I pointed at the small package on the davenport. "That's the heroin."

The mustache was flat and tight. He followed it in and went across the room and looked down at what I'd pointed out.

"A Federal matter," I said carefully, slowly.

He nodded, keeping his face impassive. "Obviously," he said. "But I don't like the idea of it being wrapped up in one of my sales contracts."

"I thought so," I said. "I wondered what we could do about that."

He brought up his eyes at me speculatively. His mustache was still flat, still tight.

I said: "Maybe we could destroy that. Maybe we could wrap the stuff in a newspaper instead." I stopped, waited, let him study my eyes, let him think it through as long as he wished. I didn't care how long he took. I had him as cold as the bottom of a deep freeze.

The mustache suddenly relaxed. "How much would you want?" he asked softly.

"About a hundred thousand dollars," I said.

"What?"

"A hundred thousand," I repeated. "You see, this isn't all of it. There are three other packages like this and I'm the only one who knows where they are."

"I see," he said.

He took his eyes away from mine. The mustache was flat again, tight again. I folded my arms slowly and watched as his hand went under his topcoat. I didn't move. I watched him bring out the .22 target revolver I knew he'd have with him. I watched him point it at my middle; and I listened to him as he whispered hoarsely:

"I like it better this way."

"I thought you would," I said. There was no sound from the bathroom.

Crispin's gun moved menacingly toward me. "Talk, you dirty chiseler!"

"Names," I sighed. I turned my head slightly and said just a trifle louder: "Now, Martin."

Martin's gun roared once. I watched Crispin's right shoulder snap back. The .22 fell from his hand to the rug. He stood stiffly, an incredulous look on his face, his carefully waxed mustache suddenly a little rumpled. And then he went down. Dishes rattled out in the kitchenette when he hit.

"That was damned easy," Martin said suspiciously, coming from the bathroom. There was sweat on his forehead.

"Wasn't it? Same way it must have seemed to the boys when Columbus stood an egg on its end."

Martin went over and put cuffs on Crispin. He leaned down and examined the fallen man. "He ain't dead," he muttered.

"No. We'll get a doctor for him and after that you and I are going downtown to give it to the Federals. And tomorrow—" I continued relentlessly—"your wife, who happens to be Superintendent of Schools, is going to announce through the newspapers that little Janie Barron is reinstated in school. And at the same time she's going to publicly apologize for the smear on the girl's name." I stopped. I felt like sneering down at him.

It was hard to swallow, I knew that. He stared up at me and his eyes started to get rebellious again.

"I'm the only one knows where the car is," I said again. And then I lied a little: "And if something should happen to me, Martin, I've arranged for the newspapers to get hold of it. Imagine the field day they'd have over you."

His eyes became agonized. "Lord, Branes, you can't do it!" he whined. "There'll be an investigation. Maybe there's other school kids mixed up in the thing. Think of my wife. She'll get canned, maybe. There'll be a big stink—"

"What did you expect?" I growled. "To hell with crooked guys like you. You smell up an honest police force. Last night you could have done it and it'd be over with. Now it's just twice as hard—and there's been a young girl hurt. To hell with you."

He whispered something unprintable at me for that, but I didn't care. I was sick of him.

The next morning's papers carried it. The girl was reinstated. Mrs. Elizabeth Martin, "wife of Captain Martin of Homicide Division," regretted her part in the mistake. She regretted it most sincerely.

There was more. City Council was probing into it now, and the P.T.A. was incensed. Red-out, and marijuana, and heroin don't sound so good when you think of them in connection with teen-agers.

I looked up a number in the phone book and dialed and got her father on the other end. He had a nice-sounding voice like I knew he would, living in a nice respectable desert-type place like he did.

I said: "This is John Branes, Mr. Barron. The private eye. A couple nights ago your

daughter asked me to help her and I think I have, but—" I looked around at my wrecked living room. "There've been expenses. About a hundred dollars worth of expenses. Would you okay a bill like that?"

"I certainly would, Mr Branes," he said. "My daughter told us about you; and we read the good news in the paper a little while ago."

"Okay," I said. I hung up, feeling pretty good. A couple of days later I got a check in the mail. With it was a little note in a nice handwriting. It said simply:

Thanks, Johnny Branes.

I saw her one Sunday after that, going into church with her folks. She looked swell. She looked eighteen or twenty even, and happy like she should. She didn't see me, even though my hot-rod is pretty conspicuous. But it's smooth. And man, it's fast.

THE END.

SLAYER AT SEA

(Continued from page 26.)

to it. There were horrid little notes—not love letters, even though she kept them in a scented box—little notes that mentioned other women, real or imagined, women who wanted to marry him. And they were all such wealthy women, too.

* * * * *

When the *Southern Cross* sailed, Shan was there to see me off. "This will be the last time you'll be seeing me sail out of here, Shan," I told him.

"Changing ships?"

"No. I'm making one last trip so as to get a stake. Then I'm going to swallow the anchor and take on a shoreside job."

He shook his head and looked past me. "Dog, I just can't figure women out."

"We're two of a kind, Shan, when it comes to women. I guess you knew that when I pulled my bluff, I had no idea that Anita—"

"I wasn't thinking of La Belmont," he said and grinned at Fran who was close by my side. "What I was going to say was that I can't figure out how a knothead like you can get a girl like Fran. What does she see in you, anyway?"

"A husband—two months from now," Fran said.

CRIME, MURDER AND GUNS

By J. E. B. COLE

DOWN through the ages individual or personal murder weapons on a percentage basis have not kept up with the other developments of our so-called civilization. This statement seems ambiguous, so let's look at the facts.

The first murder weapon could have been a handful of rock, a hunk of branch from a near-by tree, or perhaps just two strong hands.

As civilization advanced and man gradually came down out of the trees and caves, he made wondrous discoveries. A rock secured to the end of a stick made a good defense weapon, and if an edge was chipped sharp, it made a tool that could be used for cutting and hacking, as well as for splitting the head of a natural enemy.

After the discovery of copper, some individual found out, no doubt by accident, that it could be hardened by melting and mixing with other soft metals. Knives and spear points that made fine hunting weapons were eventually fashioned and man was on his way to physical, as well as mental superiority over even the larger of the huge animals that then inhabited the earth.

As mankind's "know-how" increased, his life became more complicated, his defense weapons became instruments of offense, and the practice of warfare came into prominent existence.

And with the development of metallurgy, murder weapons became more powerful and more efficient, until the present time when these tools have reached a high point.

This does not include weapons of mass murder, such as long-range pieces of heavy ordnance, or the atomic bomb, but rather of the weapon which, in popular conception, has an unjustly blackened reputation, the handgun!

It's a fact that handguns have been used as murder weapons, and just for the record here are a few of the most famous instances. A cap and ball pistol, developed in the United States by Deringer of Philadelphia, was used by John Wilkes Booth to murder President Lincoln.

This pistol was, of course, a muzzle loader of .52 caliber, shooting a half-ounce ball. These arms were widely used during the great American era of the Ohio and Mississippi steamboats. It is a strange com-

ment on mankind that due to the publicity given this weapon as a result of Lincoln's assassination it was in such great demand that Deringer could not produce enough to supply the market.

Rival gunmakers copied the pistol, even going so far as adding an "r" and stamping the imitations "Derringers."

One man, not necessarily the most infamous, but who has received great notoriety, was William Bonney, the New York street urchin who became a Western desperado—better known as Billy the Kid. He evidently had no real favorite as a murder weapon.

When Jesse James surrendered to Governor T. T. Crittenden, of Missouri, he had in his possession a Smith & Wesson, single action Schofield Model revolver, number 366.

Perhaps the most infamous murder weapon of modern times is the First Model (1900) Browning Automatic Pistol that was used by the Serbian student Princep to murder the Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife on June 28th, 1914. This act was the spark that set off World War I. The first model Browning was the weapon for which the 7.65 mm.—known in the United States as the .32 Automatic Colt Pistol—cartridge was developed.

Actually, facts prove that the handgun is far in the minority when it comes to taking a human life by violent action. Due to the fact that the villain in popular gangster movies inevitably carries and uses a handgun, usually an automatic, this weapon has become the standard badge of murder!

Real life, as well as reel life, has been responsible for this popular misconception. In the Prohibition era, during the roaring 1920's, it was the practice of the gangster mobs to obtain their guns by robbing National Guard Armories, or the arsenals of law enforcement agencies, where ordinarily there was a good supply of army .45 caliber Service Automatic Pistols on hand.

But the over-all picture is what we want. As I just mentioned, records show that the revolver and automatic pistol is not used in the majority of murders. Primitive methods, involving the use of clubs, knives, or the oldest weapon of all, the clenched fist, lead the field.

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